

Don't Get Cut On My Edges

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Don't Get Cut On My Edges

by [oldesthuntress \(chaoticgoodlawyer\)](#)

Summary

Starting college is intimidating and Matthew had for the most part resigned himself to four years of endless work and lonely hours. But university brings new experiences, unparalleled awkwardness, surprising friends and their frustratingly hot brothers. What's a guy to do?

Notes

All chapter titles are related to specific songs. First chapter is from the Killers' "Mr. Brightside" (can you tell I love that song). The story title is from Halsey's "Young God," which was actually the inspiration for this entire story.

Disclaimer: I was neither a student athlete nor attended either of the universities I'm basing this story off of. Also, I like hockey but am certainly not an expert. This is just for fun and all.

Prologue: Coming Out of My Cage

Matthew Williams put his back to the door and sighed when he saw that the previously empty portion of his dorm room was covered in clothes, boxes, and unhung posters. He had been desperately hoping to have a few days to himself before his roommate arrived, if only to mentally adjust to being away from home. It didn't help any that he had just come from meeting his new teammates. He had known that he would be a nobody here, that his reputation was going to stay at home. Experiencing it was something entirely different.

Hockey had always been his sanctuary. Skating felt like flying and he often found himself craving the same adrenaline rush that games brought in the off season. Practicing and playing was the only time he and his twin brother, Alfred, had never clashed. Instead, they made a lethal team in the rink that had earned them several local monikers, his favorite being "Fire and Ice." Alfred was the forward, the fire, the one who made all the showy plays and scored the goals. Matthew was the defenseman, the ice, freezing most strategies their opposition attempted. With them playing, few of the other team's tactics worked. It had made both of them targets for foul play, though that stopped after the first few attempts. They were excellent players to begin with, but what made them the best in their league was that they were their own enforcers.

That's the thing about fire and ice; make your choice but both can burn you alive. Separate, they were dangerous. Together, they could kill you.

The problem for Matthew with their minor athletic celebrity back home was that it never translated to his everyday life. It didn't change that, off the ice, he was still awkward, quiet, overly polite Matthew. He preferred to stay home and study, trying desperately to earn good enough grades to get a scholarship to university. In public, he faded into the background to the point that people didn't even notice if he was there.

If he was unremarkable next to everyone else, he was invisible next to Alfred.

Alfred was the all-American golden boy. Funny, outgoing, and naturally smart, he was the one that drew everyone's eye in a room. He stole the hearts of guys and girls alike, a fact he took advantage of. He was loud, brash, and irreverent. By a fluke of nature, Alfred had been born at 11:58 on the Fourth of July and Matthew had followed six minutes later, at 12:04 on July 5th. Alfred was the one who got fireworks on his birthday. He didn't.

Matthew was fine with that; they were different people and the thought of having everyone's attention like Alfred constantly did made him nervous. After a certain point, he had gotten used to being invisible and that allowed him certain freedoms that Alfred didn't have. It didn't make him love his brother any less.

What did, however, was how Matthew was the one who constantly was stuck smoothing the feathers that Alfred ruffled. He had been cleaning up Alfred's messes for as long as he could remember, doing his best to make everyone happy. What bothered Matthew was how little Alfred seemed to understand or care about him off the ice. He was constantly pushing his

"little" brother to go out with him and his friends, to date someone, to be more like him. He resented the fact that Alfred did just as well as him on tests and assignments even though he put in only a fraction of the time that Matthew did. They disagreed about almost everything and Alfred was the only one who could make Matthew lose his temper in a short period of time. Yes, Matthew loved his brother, but he didn't like him.

Matthew would never tell him, but it was a relief when Alfred decided to go to a school 200 miles away.

But back to the point. Hockey was one of the few ways people saw him and respected him at home. He had proven himself and the knowledge that Alfred would always have his back on the ice was comforting. Here, he was just another freshman and his teammates had taken one assessing glance before dismissing him. He knew he needed to show he was a valuable member of the team before they would warm up to him, but he was still hoping to see a friendly face. Matthew didn't know anyone in the state and he was awful at making friends. He saw that everyone was talking to someone else when the coach finished addressing them and took his leave. The last thing he wanted to do was intrude where he wasn't wanted.

Maybe if he accepted the fact that the next four years were going to be spent alone, he eventually become okay with it.

Matthew heard loud voices in the hall and moved to finish unpacking what little possessions he had left in boxes. The people got louder and a strange clicking noise came from the door as a keycard was inserted. *Looks like it's time to meet who I'll be living with for the next year.*

"I don't CARE if you live in the same building, you bastard. You're not—" Matthew watched as a tan, somewhat short boy froze in the entrance of the dorm. His eyes were wide and a strange olive color and Matthew abruptly realized that this guy was gorgeous. Jesus, he hoped he wasn't his roommate; living with a boy that beautiful could give a guy a complex.

When nothing was said for a second of Matthew and this mystery man just staring at each other, a second, equally beautiful guy stuck his head into the room as he said, "Ve, why'd you stop, Lo—oh! You must be Lovi's roommate. Hi!" His eyes were squinting to the point that he couldn't make out the color of them, but he at least was smiling.

Involuntarily blushing, Matthew smiled back awkwardly and said, "Uh, yeah. Um, sorry. I'm Matthew Williams. It's nice to meet you." He stepped forward and offered his hand first to this Lovi, who had yet to move or say anything. He was his roommate, apparently; he should be greeted first, right?

His roommate blinked at him in confusion for a moment before squinting at him suspiciously but moved to take his hand anyway. "Lovino Vargas. This idiot is my brother, Feliciano."

"Ve, call me, Feli!" Feliciano moved to take his hand and shook it enthusiastically. Goodness, he had a lot of energy.

"Great. You both can call me Mattie or Matt if you want. Neither bothers me." When Lovino nodded and moved further into the room towards his stuff, Feliciano started speaking again.

"Okay, Mattie. Are you a first year, too?"

"Uh, yes—"

"This *is* the freshmen dorm, Feli," Lovino, grumbled under his breath, still loud enough to be audible.

Feliciano seemed to roll his eyes. "I know *that*, Lovi, but some sophomores live here, too, and RAs can be upperclassmen."

"Um, it seemed like you two were talking about something when you came in. I can leave and give you some privacy, if you like. I don't want to intrude."

Lovino frowned at him. "I'm not going to kick you out of your own room, Matthew, but I appreciate the offer."

"Besides, we should get to know each other!" Feliciano said. Matthew winced internally, not really up to dealing with Feliciano's energy level.

Lovino saved him. "Don't you have your own roommate to get to know?"

Feliciano pouted a little. "He hasn't shown up yet. You know that, Lovi."

"Why did you guys move in early, if you don't mind me asking? I had to because I'm an athlete. Do you play something?"

"Yep! We're on the footba—sorry, soccer team. What do you play, Mattie?"

"Let me guess..." Lovino gave him a slow look up and down that made him flush again. Good lord. "...you run track? Or maybe swim?"

"Ah, no. But those were good guesses." Matthew wasn't as solidly built as his brother, let alone the other members of his team. What he lacked in strength he made up with speed, cunning, and sheer ruthlessness. People underestimated him because of his personality and size. It was a mistake, when acted on, they didn't make twice unless they were particularly thick. "I actually play hockey."

Feliciano's eyes widened, showing they were a startling gold color, and Lovino raised his eyebrows at him. "Dangerous sport for someone as nice as you."

Matthew looked at his roommate. "Just because I prefer to be nice doesn't mean I can't be mean."

Lovino smiled at him for the first time. "You know, Mattie, I think this roommate thing might just work out."

Feliciano looked at them askance before shrugging. "That's good. Ve, do you know anyone else here, Mattie?"

"No, not at all. I think a few people from my high school are going here, though I'm not sure. My brother might know."

"You have a brother?" Feliciano seemed intent on asking him questions, but Matthew wasn't going to complain. It was nice to have someone show interest and without him there, an awkward silence might follow. This was fine.

"Yes, a twin. He's starting school a bit farther north."

"What's his name?"

"Alfred. Hope you never meet him."

"Why?"

"He can be a lot to handle."

"What are you studying?"

Jesus. There's questions then there's an interrogation. "History and French, but I'm pre-law. How about—"

"Oooh, what kind of law?"

"I'm not really sure yet. Um—"

"Christ, Feli, let the guy—"

"Are you gay?"

"Pretty sure but I don't-!" Holy shit. Matthew slapped a hand over his mouth and stared at a grinning Feliciano in shock.

"What the everloving fuck, Feli! We just met the guy!" Lovino looked upset and that made Matthew fear that he would be for more than one reason.

Feliciano shrugged. "What? It's good to know if the person you're living with is going to be homophobic or not. If not for a general human assessment, then it was good for me to know how to act around him." Feliciano looked at him and waved. "Hi, Feliciano Vargas, openly pan."

Still a little shocked, Matthew lifted the hand not covering his mouth and waved back.

"Still, that was way too fucking personal, even if Matthew is too shocked to say anything. Fucking Christ, you don't trick people into coming out to you."

"I just asked, Lovi."

"We all know you didn't just ask. Fucking shit." Lovino looked at Matthew. "I apologize for my brother, Matthew. He was just leaving." Lovino cut his eyes to Feliciano with a glare.

Feliciano put his hands up in surrender and started backing towards the door. "I'm sorry if I offended you, Mattie, but I needed to know. Don't worry; I'm not going to tell anyone without your permission. To answer what I think was your question earlier, I'm an art and Italian major. Ve, ciao!"

Feliciano opened the door then disappeared into the hall. Matthew slowly lowered his hands and looked at Lovino worriedly. "Um, will this be a problem?"

"I fucking hope not. *Christ*, my brother needs to learn boundaries. Ya think you raise 'em right then BAM! I can't fucking believe—oh, you meant that you're gay."

Matthew laughed a little, nervous. "Something like that. Yes, that's what I meant."

"Only if you have a problem that I'm bi, too. And for the sake of peace, can we agree here and now not to date each other, at least for the year? It's not that I wouldn't want to date you because you're kind of ridiculously attractive and appear to be one of those rare people I can bear to be around for extended periods of time. It's just, if we broke up and still had to be roommates, it would be too fucking awkward." Lovino had turned cherry red by the time he was done talking and was glaring angrily at the floor. It made Matthew smile, though he didn't know how to deal with the *ridiculously attractive* part, especially considering who was talking. He opted to ignore it.

"Sounds like a plan to me. Friends?"

Lovino looked up at him and the corner of his mouth twitched. "You'll do."

Maybe this whole college thing didn't have to be as miserable as he was expecting.

Chapter 1: Don't Need Money When You Look Like That

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"No, that idiot is exactly two years younger than me. I took a couple years to work after finishing high school. I wanted a break from classes and didn't really see the point of spending a fuckton of money on college when I had no goddamn clue what I wanted to do with my life."

Matthew nodded. He and Lovino had gotten hungry and had decided to brave the school's cafeteria. They were both on meal plans and more than a little apprehensive about the food situation after high school. It wasn't anything to write home about, but it could have been much worse. "That makes sense. I'm here on a scholarship, so I lucked out a bit. I'm surprised you decided to go to the same school as Feli. I was so happy my brother took the offer from his school that I couldn't see straight."

Lovino shrugged. "He's an idiot, but he's my idiot. I've gotta look out for him, otherwise who knows what kind of trouble that bastard would find. Hell, the kid walks around with his eyes damn near closed. I'm frankly surprised his ass hasn't fallen down some manhole."

Matthew laughed and leaned back in his chair. "So what did you decide to do, if you don't mind telling me?"

Lovino rolled his eyes and waved his hand. "Matt, we're living together. You've got to stop with that overly polite shit. Makes me feel like I need to be in a monkey suit or somethin'. Also, what the hell do you want me to call you? You never said what you would prefer."

Matthew's mouth twisted wryly and he said, "Mattie. Now, you avoided the question."

Lovino smiled at him. "See, that wasn't so fuckin' hard, was it? I worked at a local gardening center for those years and found that I *really* like plants, especially tomatoes. So I'm here for their botany program. I'm also in Italian, but that's more because I already know it and want to get the language requirement out of the way."

Matthew raised an eyebrow. "Tomatoes?"

"Oi, you got a problem with tomatoes?"

Matthew laughed and put his hands up in surrender. "I have no opinion on tomatoes."

"Damn fuckin' right. Tomatoes are the shit, man, you have no—" Lovino's eyes were drawn to something behind Matthew, which was most of the rest of the room. "Ah, fuck me."

Matthew smirked. "I thought we agreed not to go there, though I'm open to renegotiation."

Lovino looked at him in shock before turning bright red and throwing one of his left over fries at Matthew when he saw that he was just teasing him. "You asshole, that's not what I

meant. I met the rest of my team today and the fucker that is the captain just walked in. He called me cute in front of everyone and now I'm going to be endlessly teased. It doesn't help that Feli pegged him immediately as my type: tall, competent, and way the fuck out of my league."

"Okay, I'm having trouble believing that last. I'm pretty sure on looks alone you could attract just about anyone."

Lovino narrowed his eyes at him. "You need your prescription checked. Either that or you're fucking with me."

"You're joking, right? Do you own a mirror?" When Lovino's expression didn't change, Matthew said, "Oh, we are so having a talk when we get back to our room. In the meantime, point this guy out to me before I start waxing poetic about how gorgeous you are in a crowded cafeteria."

Lovino rolled his eyes but was visibly fighting a smile before pursing his lips and nodding somewhere over Matthew's right shoulder. "He's over there. The one with impossible eyes, just-woke-up hair, and a body Adonis would have killed for."

Matthew did his best to be subtle as he turned around a little to figure out who this guy was. He started to make like he was searching for someone when his eyes stopped on the first guy he had ever seen that made his hormones immediately sit up and take notice. Slouching in a way that made his rickety wooden seat look like a throne, the guy was smirking at something his friend was saying. Worryingly pale with a strange shade of silver as his hair color, he gestured pointedly. Since he was in a simple black tank top and grey sweatpants, exactly how fit he was easy to see, and his movement making the black ink of a tattoo on his back all the more obvious. When he turned a little towards Matthew to look at his other friend, Matthew felt his breath catch at the sharpness of his jaw, pink lips, and the startling crimson of his eyes. When his smile turned wicked, Matthew felt the sensation of static electricity race up the back of his thighs as something tightened in his gut.

A little dazed, Matthew turned back to Lovino with an astonished, "*Fuck me.*"

Lovino took one look at Matthew's face and burst out laughing. Matthew glared at him until he gained enough control to say, "Fucking hell, Mattie. You look like someone brained you with a sledgehammer."

"This isn't funny, Lovino. Oh, I do *not* like this. Does most attraction feel like this? I feel like I'm losing my goddamn mind." Matthew grouched testily. His mind helpfully supplied all sorts of wonderful images of things they could do together that had him blushing intensely. *Fuck.*

Still chuckling, Lovino said, "The fuck are you talking about, Mattie? You said you were gay."

Matthew looked around briefly and saw that no one was close enough to hear them. "I didn't finish talking. I was going to say, 'pretty sure, but I don't ever feel the need to act on it.' I know I like guys, but I've never looked at someone and just felt like, like—*this*." He started drinking the soda in his cup, if only to shut himself up. His eyes flicked back over to the guy

before he caught himself, only to focus intently on Lovino's face. *Looks like I'm a fucking open book today.*

Lovino looked surprised and not a little curious. "Really? You've never looked at a guy before now and thought, *I'd be down to bounce on your dick?*" Matthew started choking on his pop. "Shit, you okay over there?"

Matthew glared at him and desperately wanted to hide as he felt his face turn red and his eyes water. In between gulping breaths, he emphatically said, "*No!*"

"Which question are you answering, the dick one or—" When Matthew threw one of his lukewarm fries at him, Lovino grinned. "Hey, it's a valid question."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't. We're friends." It was true. Despite this unfortunate incident, over the past few hours Matthew really did come to like Lovino, foul mouth and all. "Besides, now you understand what I was talking about. Hell, just looking at him made you curse for the first time in front of me. Oh, and to answer your question: no, all attraction is not like that. Whatever the fuck you just experienced seems like a class of its own. *Mazel tov.*"

Matthew had regained his composure for the most part in more ways than one. The boy, no, *man* was honestly the hottest person Matthew had ever seen, but he was interested in his roommate, which was fine. Hell, he was happy for Lovino, if a little (okay, very) envious. "You had a point. I don't know if I should be jealous that you'll be getting sweaty with him regularly or relived. I have a lot of self-control, but I would probably end up making a fool of myself after a week around him."

Lovino groaned. "Not helpful, Mattie."

"Look, if you get blessed by the gods, just warn me before bringing him back to the room? Put a hat on the door or something and I'll hole up in the library. Alfred and his conquests had an unfortunate habit of wandering and I would *really* prefer not to walk in on you."

"Fair enough and same for you. Though it would take a miracle both for a guy like that to like me that much and for me to get over what a fucking bastard he was."

Matthew frowned. "First, I'm still sure he's in your league." He was so far out of Matthew's league, they weren't even playing the same sport, but that wasn't the issue here. "Second, did he do something beyond calling you cute?"

Lovino huffed out a breath and turned red, refusing to meet Matthew's eyes. "Not really. He was actually really nice to everyone. I guess it's kinda silly...no! It's reasonable not to want to be undermined before I even start playing, goddammit." And he was back to being angry. Matthew was going to leave that alone. If anger was Lovino's way of coping, who was he to judge, especially with his past.

Trying to lighten the mood, Matthew smirked and said, "Well, in that case, you wouldn't mind if I—"

"Oh, hell n—I mean, go right ahead. What would I care? Hell, you're a decent guy. Just don't bring him around the room. I'll see enough of his perfect ass and annoying green eyes at practice."

If Matthew's thoughts had breaks, they would be screeching to a halt. "Wait, what?"

Lovino gave him a deadpan look. "I said that, I wouldn't mind if—"

"No, not that part and for the record, I wouldn't date a guy my friend was seriously attracted to. The part about his eyes. You said green?"

"Yeeesssss? Antonio has green eyes. Why are you being so fucking weird about this?"

Matthew relaxed and laughed a little. "We're talking about two completely different people. What does Antonio look like?"

Lovino looked disbelieving but said, "Grass green eyes, wavy hair the color of dark chocolate, a wide smile, tan like he's been in the sun too long, and, to reiterate, the most perfect ass I have ever seen."

Matthew turned to take a second look and managed to look past the heart-stoppingly gorgeous guy he had seen earlier to find someone who matched Lovino's description. Face open and smiling, the person that had to be Antonio was very attractive. He also seemed to have an unusually attractive group of friends. Beyond the life-ruining albino, he was sitting with a blond, blue eyed man who was so beautiful he could have been androgynous. But something about his face made him seem very masculine and his expression made Matthew think he probably wasn't thinking PG-13 thoughts. There was almost something familiar about him...but Matthew didn't want to be caught staring to try and figure it out. The last guy at their table had his back to Matthew, but he would bet that the tall, lanky red-head would fit right in with his tablemates.

Matthew took all this in within about 5 seconds, not wanting to be caught looking. When he turned back to Lovino, he said, "Antonio sure has an attractive group of friends."

Lovino slowly started to smile at him. "So who's the guy you want to jump? It's only fair that you tell me now."

"Wow, it's been at least 30 seconds since you cursed. Have you started experiencing withdrawal?"

"Shut the fuck up, you bastard. Tell me before I guess and go up to him and say how much you want to—"

"You wouldn't."

Lovino pretended to consider it before smiling. "Nah, but it's amusing as hell to think of it. You're stalling."

Matthew bit his lip and sighed before saying, "The guy at Antonio's table with the black tank top and tattoo. And in my defense, red eyes are a hell of a lot more impossible than green

ones."

Lovino's eyes cut behind him before he was even finished talking. Then he started to smile slowly, evilly, and Matthew regretted everything in his life that led him to this point. "I wouldn't have pegged you as the type that likes bad boys, Mattie. I can work—fuck, Antonio saw me. Time to go."

Lovino had turned that alarming shade of red again and he was now frantically piling his plates together to take over to the dish collection area. Matthew took pity on him and stood immediately, hoping to make it look like he had suggested leaving. He pushed in his chair and grabbed his plates, turning to take the long way around to avoid getting within earshot of the tragically hot guys. Lovino saw and said, "If we go that way, it will look like we are running away."

"Lovi," Matthew said with incredible patience. "We are running away."

Lovino stared at him for a second before shrugging. "Fair enough. And I'm going to let you call me Lovi because I like you just that much so don't fuck it up, alright?"

Matthew grinned at him. "Sure, Lovi."

They walked quickly, with Matthew walking on Lovino's left to try and shield him a bit. He also acted like he didn't see Antonio waving to them. It was probably best for all involved. Matthew felt a shiver go down his spine and barely resisted the urge to look over, fearing that someone other than Antonio was watching them leave.

Gilbert noticed immediately when Antonio's gaze focused on something outside of their friend group. Francis stopped complaining about the syllabus his professor had sent him and said, "*Mon ami*, what is it?"

"One of my new players is here. His name is Lovino and he's really cute, if a little angry at everything." Antonio smiled a little dopily and continued with, "But he was looking over here and smiling, so maybe he doesn't hate me after all!"

Gilbert looked over to see a relatively short tan guy, who was built like a runner and his face was cherry red. He looked as if he was pouting as he talked to someone who stood to leave. Gilbert could see the appeal, though he was more Antonio's type than his. "Are you sure, Tonio? 'Cause it looks to me like he's embarrassed."

"An' what did ye do ta make him hate ye so soon?" Alistair asked, as usual getting to the heart of the matter.

Gilbert looked back to his friend to see him start pouting as well. "I said he was cute. It was a compliment!"

"Where did ye say it?"

"...At the meeting today."

"Well, fuck, Tonio." Gilbert said, laughing. "I would hate you too if you called me cute in front of my new teammates, especially if I was a freshman and you were my team captain."

"And if I already thought you were hot," Francis threw in for good measure.

Antonio frowned and started to wave over to try and get the attention of the now leaving friends. "I didn't mean anything by it. I just thought Lovi was cute so I said so."

Gilbert turned to watch them leave and his gaze was caught and held not on Lovino, but on the friend who seemed to be doing his best to protect him. Tall, the guy had his somewhat long blond hair in a messy bun and was wearing glasses. He couldn't tell exactly what he looked like, considering the guy was wearing a sweatshirt and loose jeans, even in this hot weather. Gilbert didn't know why he was so interested in him, but he didn't fight the urge to watch as both he and Lovino left without making eye contact. It was only when the guy paused at the exit and turned to smile at Lovino that Gilbert realized that whoever this guy was, he was beautiful.

It was hard to be sure from his distance, but Gilbert could have sworn his eyes were damn near purple and kind. He struck Gilbert as soft until his kissable mouth smirked mischievously at Lovino as they turned to leave the room, his way sped along with a quick shove. He was laughing as the door closed behind them. The sound didn't carry over the noise of the dining hall, but the action made his face light up and had Gilbert blinking in surprise. It had been a hell of a long time since he had been so effected by someone's appearance and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

"Who was that guy he was with?" When silence followed his question, Gilbert looked at his friends only to see them staring at him. "What? Did I interrupt someone or something?"

Almost in sync, his friends started to smirk at him. *Shit.*

"Why do you want to know, Gil?" Francis asked, his tone suggestive.

Backpedal, dammit. "For Tonio, of course. If he makes friends with Lovino's friends then he'll have a better chance at getting the new guy to like him."

"Uh-huh." Alistair said, clearly not believing him.

"Lovi seems like a very angry person and Feli, his brother, said that he doesn't make friends very easily. They might be roommates or something," Antonio supplied helpfully.

Gilbert's eyes darted between his friends suspiciously. "It's not like I care. I don't even know the guy."

"Gilly," Alistair said, "we just watched ye stare at that boy fer a good thirty seconds. We know no one has caught yer interest since Roderich and can't help but be hopeful."

"*Oui*, Alistair is right, Gilbert. I may not understand your choice, but if you want to pursue him, then we'll support you. I'm surprised you even noticed him next to the beauty that was

Lovino," Antonio glared at him so Francis quickly followed with, "But you *did* notice him. I can find out who he is for you. He did seem a little familiar, like I could almost *swear* I..."

Gilbert threw his hands up in exasperation. "Look, I noticed a cute boy, big fucking deal. I don't even know his name and you are acting like I'm ready to give the guy mine! Chill. For all we know, he and Lovino are dating or, hell, he could be straight as an arrow—but that is not the point."

"I'll leave it, but if you have the chance to get to know him, promise you'll try?" Francis asked, more serious that the situation called for in Gilbert's opinion. Yes, the whole deal with Roderich and Elizabeta had been one huge mess and sure, Gilbert hasn't exactly been lucky in love but he was twenty for fuck's sake. He had all the time in the world. And he had been busy! Between class and work, he had had no energy to bother with even thinking about looking for someone else, so their reactions were completely uncalled for. Hell, he would probably never see the guy again, but if it got them off his back...

"Yeah, sure. He looks friendly enough and if he's a first year then he could use a familiar face. Now, can we please get back to the topic at hand? Why don't we give Tonio the third degree about hitting on freshmen at a team meeting?"

"Hey!"

"What a good idea..." Francis said, focusing back on Antonio. Gilbert sighed and thought he was out of the woods, only to notice that Alistair was still looking at him closely. Shit. If Alistair got their head around something, then there was no deterring them from it. They were a computer science and computational linguistics major and probably the most dangerous out of their friend group, which was *really* saying something. If they wanted something, they got it, especially if it was information.

Gilbert shrugged mentally and raised an eyebrow at his Scottish friend before turning to tease Antonio. Since Alistair was going to do what they wanted anyway, there was no reason to worry about it. It wasn't likely to come to anything.

"Lovi! Mattie! Wait up!"

Both Lovino and Matthew turned towards Feliciano, only the latter with a smile. Matthew didn't resent Feliciano for tricking him into coming out earlier. In fact, he would thank him from not only breaking the ice but obliterating it between him and Lovino. It had allowed them to talk without a lot of barriers with those facts out in the open. He *would* thank him if he wasn't concerned that he would be reinforcing a bad habit. Not everyone was as comfortable as he was with his sexuality or other people knowing about it.

"Hi, Feli."

Feliciano had reached them out of breath but managed to huff at them, "Lovi, why didn't you answer your phone?"

Lovino frowned and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Shit, Feli. My phone was on silent. What's wrong?"

"Ve, nothing really." Feliciano lowered his voice and they started moving as a group towards their dorm. "But I was flirting with this really pretty girl earlier and then I saw this reeeaaally handsome guy that I wanted to say hi to but I was scared and was hoping you could give me some advice, that's all."

Matthew laughed lightly to himself. "It seems like this campus is infested with them."

Feliciano's eyes widened. "What happened? There's more guys like that? Or did—ve, Lovi did you see Antonio again?"

"Shut up, you bastards, at least until we get to our room. Fucking hell, you would think we were in privacy, the way you two were spouting off other people's business," Lovino grumbled as they swiped in and headed for the stairs. Both Feliciano and Matthew just grinned at him. In the silence that lasted the journey to his room, Matthew marveled at how familiar he was to Lovino after knowing him no more than four hours. With any other person, that comment would have made him flush with shame and worry. But Matthew knew damn well that there was no one else around them when they were talking and that his new friend had just a sour disposition. Still, he kept quiet and so did Feliciano.

By the time Lovino was using his ID to open the door, Feliciano was nearly vibrating with restraint. Matthew had to bite his lip and look away to avoid laughing. The Vargas brothers were so different, it was funny.

Lovino was scowling as he motioned everyone inside then shut the door. It only deepened when Feliciano blurted, "Did you see Tonio again?"

"Why are you calling that bastard that stupid name, Feli? I *might* have seen him but that has nothing to do with anything—"

"False," Matthew interjected with a grin that earned him a glare.

"—And you were here to talk about something else, so get talking about that. Or, hell, soccer bastard is old news. Ask Mattie about the pale dude with a tattoo that made him want to get on his—"

"If I'm going down, I'm taking you with me. I fucking *dare you* to finish that sentence."

Lovino's mouth closed with an audible snap of his teeth and scowled at Matthew.

"Soooo, yes?" Feliciano supplied with a smile. He was looking between the two curiously, like he was trying to figure something out before shaking his head and turning to poke Lovino repeatedly. "Ve, Lovi, do you like Tonio? I caught you staring at him when he was leaving and it's been forever since I saw you blush like that because someone said you were cute."

"Fucking Christ, Feli, just tell Matthew my life story, why don't you?"

Feliciano frowned at him. "But you texted me that you told Mattie you were bi. And he implied that he thought you liked Antonio, too." Feliciano then smiled mischievously at Matthew before saying, "Which makes me wonder what else Mattie would have to say on the matter?"

Lovino shot Matthew a look that was almost like he was checking for something and Matthew shrugged before saying, "Nothing really. Lovino pointed Antonio out and there was a mix-up when I thought that someone else was Antonio from his description. That's all." He didn't lie, but Feliciano was smart enough to look confused at his abbreviated explanation.

"How could you confuse Tonio with someone else? He's kinda distinctive."

It was Matthew's turn to look at Lovino who sighed and threw his hands up. "Okay, I *might* have only described him as somewhat attractive—"

Feliciano cut him off with a squeal and a rough hug. "Ve, I knew you thought he was hot!"

"Yeah, well, Mattie here thought I meant some guy with red eyes who just happened to be at that bastard's table. And I don't mean that in the stoner sense, either. Did you even notice anyone else at the table or did you just eye fuck him then turn back to me?" Lovino lifted an eyebrow at Matthew teasing but also trying to obviously re-direct the attention. Matthew crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at him, though he wasn't actually angry.

"A: I did not eye fuck him."

"Yes, you did."

"B: Of course I noticed other people in that room."

"Yeah, no. I call bullshit."

"C: I would like to state for the record that I never *said* anything about going down on him. You were the one who brought sex into the conversation, not me."

Lovino looked at him pityingly. "Mattie, you didn't need to say it. It was written all over your face. I'm pretty sure that if he said 'fuck you' in your general vicinity, you would say, 'yes, please.'"

Matthew really wanted to deny it, but he didn't want to dig his hole of lies any deeper. If someone put them both in a room together alone and the other guy was somewhat charming and a bit interested, Matthew knew he would be putty in his hands if his libido had any say about it. In theory, at least. Even thinking about it too long made him feel weird. He was left with nothing to do but glare at Lovino.

"Oooh, Mattie! You guys had the best dinner. I wish I had gone." Feliciano pouted and Matthew saw a way out of his embarrassing situation.

"But then you wouldn't have seen your guy, Feli. Who was he?"

"Yeah, Feli. What about this guy made you want to run to your big brother for advice?"

Instead of cheering Feliciano up, he just looked sadder. "In the student center there was this really buff guy who was reading a book and looked very serious. He had blond hair and really pretty light blue eyes. I didn't want to bother him and he looked a little scary and too smart for someone like me but he was so pretty and I want to be his friend but, ve, I don't think he'll like me."

Matthew was knocked speechless but Lovino blew up. "Oi, what the fuck did I tell you about that, idiota? There are different kinds of smart and which one of us is here on a super fucking complete art scholarship, hm?"

Quiet, Feliciano said, "Me."

"Damn fuckin' right, you. If he can't see that then you don't need to be around him." Lovino nodded decisively like that was the end of the discussion, but Feliciano still looked sad.

Matthew said, "And you don't know that he won't like you, Feli. Just be yourself around him and maybe ask him what he's reading about if he looks like he would be open to talking to someone. But if he looks really engrossed, it might not be good to interrupt him. I'll keep an eye out for him on campus, but I really think you shouldn't worry. Classes haven't even started yet and neither has practice for us. You never know who you might meet, like that girl you were talking to earlier. What was she like?"

"You mean Eliza?" Feliciano's face lit up. "She was very nice and asked me if I was new and offered to give me directions if I ever got lost. I even got her phone number! She said that she was dating someone but was always looking for new friends, so I'm happy we got to talk."

"See what I mean? And the rest of the student body isn't even here yet. You might even meet someone more attractive than that guy you saw today."

"Ve, thanks Mattie, Lovi. That really helps. Oh, Mattie, what's your schedule like? I want to see if we have any classes together."

They spent the next hour or so talking about schedules, upcoming practices, and clubs they might want to join. Matthew couldn't help but think that he really got lucky with his roommate, but still didn't have much hope for making a lot of friends outside these two. It was easy for Feliciano to make friends as his encounter with Elizabeta showed and Matthew was sure he wouldn't have a problem meeting people. He was another matter altogether but, all told, he was happy with his situation. Really, hoping for anything else seemed like asking too much. He just needed to get his feet on the ground and survive his first semester. That was going to be hard enough as it was. He hoped he was up to the task.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from Jet's "Are You Gonna Be My Girl?"

Matthew is grey-ace (like me). Alistair is agender (like me).

Edit 2/8/18: hey so someone helpfully mentioned that the Scottish accent was a bit off so

I'll be going through my on-going stories over the next month or so to update it. Just fair warning for temporary inconsistencies! I'm also still working on the next chapter but law school suckerpunched me in January and currently has me by the throat.

Chapter 2: Too School For Cool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Matthew looked at the syllabus in his hand and fought off a growing wave of panic. The assignments were reasonable enough for this level of class and it was his own fucking fault anyway for taking a class designed for sophomores his first semester. The problem was, all of his other classes were like this or worse, with both final papers and exams at the end of the term, all due at the same time, with the same level of work throughout the semester. Because the universe hated him, everything was due at the height of hockey season. And he still hadn't gone to his last course!

To add insult to injury, this wasn't even a class he wanted to take. Here he was, fulfilling that last stubborn science credit that his AP scores didn't take care of, dreading every second. He understood the reasoning behind the core curriculum, but damn if he didn't wish it would go away. Abnormal psychology was the most interesting class out of the bunch that didn't require a bunch of prerequisites and wasn't chemistry, biology, or physics. It was only for one semester, but fuck if it didn't look like a hell of a lot of effort for one class.

Then the professor's words began to register again and made his already low heart sink through the floor.

"...is relatively intensive class and I know that more than a few of you are incoming first years. You still have the option of dropping, but for now, I have randomly assigned each of you a study partner with whom you will meet twice a week. There will only be two check-ins with me during the semester, so technically you could not do this. However, I've found that students who do so get much higher grades overall, not to mention that convincing me you're meeting with your partner is worth 7% of your grade. Why 7%? It's the difference between an A and an A-, a 4.0 and a 3.7 in this university's GPA scale. That should be incentive for the most ambitious of you."

Fucking hell. Between all of his other classes and hockey, Matthew didn't exactly have time for this. But it looked like he was going to have to make time.

"Now that I've explained everything, I'm going to call out the pairs. When I'm done, you're dismissed, though I suggest talking to your partners to set up meeting times before I go."

Matthew sat back and waited, taking a minute to absorb everything. He was taking five classes this semester, which was a reasonable amount and necessary for if he wanted to graduate on time with two majors and a pseudo-minor. He was going to have to get used to the course load, especially since he would need to start taking upper-level classes soon enough. At least he wasn't stuck in class for eight hours a day like in high—

"Matthew Williams?"

Matthew's eyes focused once more to the front and he raised his hand. "Yes?"

"You're with Ludwig Beilschmidt."

Movement in his peripheral vision had Matthew turning to see the rather severe expression of his study partner. Matthew couldn't get a good look at him from across the lecture hall, but he noted his large stature and slicked back blond hair. He smiled at him and received a short nod in response before Ludwig turned to study the paper in his hands.

Fuck, Matthew thought, fighting the urge to slouch until he melted onto the floor and rolled down the tiered room. He had had a brief hope that maybe his study partner would be friendly and would make meeting twice a week something to look forward to, but it seemed like Ludwig dismissed him at a glance, just like his teammates.

The thought made his lingering aches from practice that morning make themselves known again. Ugh. He was planning on heading to the school gym after class to hopefully find some room to do some stress reducing exercises or at least a free heavy bag to pound his anxieties into before stretching, but he might have to delay depending on what his partner said.

As for his teammates, not all of them looked through him. The other defenseman that he practiced the most with, Nate, had come to respect him and their new goalie, Tino, was incredibly sweet. Nate didn't say much and Tino seemed to be attached to one of their older forwards and team captain, Berwald, though Matthew was a little unsure if it was entirely voluntary yet. At the very least, he knew that if anyone got too rough with Tino, he wouldn't be the only one throwing punches from their side.

Still, it was only the second day of classes and he was beginning to feel a little drained and he hadn't even started doing regular homework. Overall, Matthew thought he could honestly say he was fucked and not in a good way.

Not that he knew what *that* was like, but hey, who's keeping track?

When she finished calling out the pairs, the professor said, "Great. Welcome to the new semester and I'll see you on Thursday. Don't forget to read the first chapter of the book and to do the first assignment. I only collect your work every other week, but trust me when I say you do *not* want to try and start that an hour before class." With that, she left.

Muttering broke out in the room and people began to get up and find their study partners. Matthew started to work his way towards the front and over to where Ludwig was sitting, but it was difficult going with most people not seeing him until they ran into him and the general size of the class. When he looked, he didn't see Ludwig anywhere.

"Matthew." Ludwig didn't yell, but his voice cut through the crowd and made Matthew look towards the door. He smiled and headed over, determined not to be awkward.

Unfortunately, he tripped on his own feet when he finally made it to the door.

Matthew had a lot of practice with falling, nowhere near as graceful off the ice when he wasn't paying attention. He managed to catch himself on the doorframe, but Ludwig still reached out to steady him.

"Crap! Sorry." Matthew said, face turning red and shoulders hunching. He was looking at the floor, hoping a hole would open to swallow him up and aware that, even with his height, Ludwig made him feel delicate. Not many people had that ability.

His voice was low, deep, and accented as he said, "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks. Um, should we..." Matthew gestured forwards with his hand.

"Uh, yes, that would probably be best."

Ludwig turned to almost march forward and Matthew sighed to himself. Not knowing what to say, Matthew snuck a glance up to Ludwig, who had to be about 6'5". Barrel-chested and with biceps Matthew wasn't sure his hands could fit around, Ludwig was brutally handsome with a strong square jaw and patrician nose. His eyes were a cold, light blue and Matthew frowned at the feeling that he was forgetting something.

Ludwig looked at him and, a little startled, Matthew tried to smile as disarmingly as possible. "Um, so full disclosure: I'm a freshmen and this is very much so not my area, but I work hard and will try my best to be useful. I play hockey, so my schedule is dictated largely by that, but unless I'm in class, my time is relatively free. How about you?"

Ludwig frowned at him and Matthew was able to hold his gaze, keeping his expression friendly. After a moment, Ludwig started to smile back, just a little. "I just started as well, though psychology is one of my majors. I'm not in any sport—" (*Holy fuck*, Matthew thought. *How are you not playing football or wrestling with that physique?*)—"nor club as of yet, so I'm usually free."

Matthew smiled wider. "Okay. How about we meet Monday and Wednesday evenings? I usually have practice in the mornings and games on Friday, but this will let us prepare for class on the next day. Does that work for you?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Great. Um, I have to head to my next class soon, but how about we meet in the library commons around seven tomorrow? We can talk about the reading and go over the problem set."

"All right. See you tomorrow, then." Ludwig smiled then started to turn to leave.

"Wait." Ludwig paused and turned to look back at him, a little confused. Matthew blushed again but he did his best to ignore it. He pulled out his phone and unlocked it before handing it to him. "Could you please create a contact for yourself and include your phone number and email? I'll send you my information, that way if one of us has to cancel, the other won't sit there indefinitely waiting."

"Sure." When Ludwig silently put his information in and handed the phone back, Matthew smiled again and turned to go.

"Thanks, Ludwig. I'll see you tomorrow."

Matthew began walking, tapping out a quick text with his name and email address to Ludwig so he would know.

"Matthew?" He startled and stumbled to a stop when Ludwig called out his name. When Matthew righted himself and looked back, Ludwig was wincing and walking towards him. He sounded sheepish when he continued with, "I'm headed that way as well. Would you mind if I walked with you?"

Matthew grinned. "No, not at all." They fell into step and he asked, "You said psychology was one of your majors? What else do you study?"

"Criminology and linguistics. I'm hoping to go into national law enforcement after I graduate."

Matthew raised his eyebrows. "That's an interesting choice, considering the times."

Ludwig shrugged. "If there aren't some good cops, then who will punish the bad ones and actually protect and serve? What about you?"

"That's a good point. I'm a history and French major, but I'm also on the pre-law track."

Ludwig looked at him with askance. "So, a lawyer? Why that?"

Matthew smiled wryly. "You mean the one profession with a worse rep than cops, you mean?"

"When you put it that way..." Ludwig looked uncomfortable and Matthew cursed himself.

"No! I was just joking with you, really. I guess I could say my reasoning matches yours. With all the lawyers out there working to actively screw people over, where would we be if someone just as trained didn't fight back? Plus, my brother just started studying business and is about as unethical as they come. If someone like me were to make his life difficult..." Matthew smiled and shrugged at the end, earning a surprising light laugh from Ludwig.

"I take it you don't get along with you brother, either?"

Score! Common ground achieved. "You could say that. He thinks being six minutes older makes me the 'baby brother' which to him means clean-up crew."

Ludwig winced in empathy. "I understand. My brother has the capacity to be organized and neat, but he actively chooses not to. He says he's morally opposed to order but I do not think it's unreasonable to ask that his mess stays contained to his room."

"You live with him? I thought that all freshmen had to live on campus."

"My brother has a propensity to flout any rule he deems stupid and has like-minded friends that enable him to do so. I don't think I want to know how he did it, but I never got a letter from housing asking why I wasn't living in a dorm. It is much cheaper to live with him and

it's close to campus, so I don't see the point in complaining." Ludwig's words were coldly logical but his tone was fond.

Matthew smiled. "It sounds like you don't mind it too much."

"I guess I don't, but it doesn't make living with him any easier. Our personalities clash like nothing else. I like everything in its place and he is actually studying how to professionally destroy things." Matthew frowned at him, confused, and Ludwig provided, "He wants to go into demolitions. He studies chemistry and engineering with an architecture minor. I'm disturbed to say how much I know about bombs and the structural weaknesses of most buildings just from him leaving his textbooks around."

Matthew laughed. "Look at it this way: he found a useful way to channel his destructive tendencies."

"You might have a point. I shudder to think of what he would do if he wasn't making things explode all day." They shared a brief laugh, then Ludwig asked, "Where are you headed? I know this campus is obscenely large, but we've been walking for a good while now."

"I'm heading to my French cinema class which is, of course, in the farthest possible location from the psych building. I'm seriously considering investing in a bike just to get to classes on time, but I'm afraid I would end up running into people." It was a legitimate concern. Classes that had gone on for the full time period were just getting out and the walkway was increasingly congested. "How about you?"

"Home; I'm done for the day." Ludwig frowned, like he was remembering something. "French cinema? Is that taught in French?"

"Yeah. I've been studying French since I was a child and spend last summer in Quebec, so I'm as close to fluent as I can get without being raised with it or living full-time in a Francophone country. Why do you ask?"

Ludwig looked impressed. "Just curious. I understand how long it takes to become fluent enough to understand films, that's all. German is my first language and I still don't get some references in American movies even after living here for so long."

"Oh, a lot of cultural references go right over my head. It helps to be in a class that will explain some of it."

"That would be helpful. Yet, even after someone explains something to me, half the time it doesn't make any sense. Oh, I know what I wanted to tell you. One of my brother's friends might be in that class."

Matthew was surprised but came to realize that he needed to turn off soon. "Really? Small world."

"Yes. I know this may sound weird, especially since we just met, but be wary around him, alright? I've known him for years and wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. You're very nice and Francis is very...he has an interesting moral compass."

Matthew would have said something like *you look like you could throw him as far as you wanted to but okay*, but Ludwig was very serious and surprisingly concerned. He remembered how intimidating Ludwig first was when he saw him and started talking to him, and wondered if anyone else had managed to get past his seriousness to have an actual conversation with him.

"Thank you, Ludwig, I appreciate the thought. I'll be wary if I run into an upperclassman by that name, though I *can* handle myself. I play hockey, remember?" Matthew smiled to soften the reminder. He gestured to the right. "I'm going this way. See you tomorrow."

"I'll see you later." Ludwig lifted a hand and turned to continue the way they had been going, pulling out earbuds as he went.

Matthew turned his way, still smiling as he kept his eye out for the correct building. Ludwig was nice, if a little too serious for his own good. He hoped that they could become friends, though the pressure to not seem completely lost at their study sessions was now in the forefront of his mind. He would have to study for the study sessions. Matthew sighed. *Looks like I'm heading to the library after class.*

It turned out that there wasn't a Francis in his class, but something about the name bothered him. Matthew didn't *think* he knew anyone named Francis who spoke French, but it still felt like he was forgetting something.

"Ve, Mattie, what are you thinking about?"

Forgetting something other than Feliciano's mystery man, apparently.

"Feli, can you describe that guy you saw last week again? With a bit more detail?"

Lovino groaned aloud. "Ah, hell, Mattie. Why'd ya have to bring up him again? It's been—"

"You think you've seen him?!" Feliciano asked, excited.

They were sitting in one of the corners of the dining hall, trying to take in as many calories as possible. Lovino and Feliciano had their first game on Friday and looked like a stiff wind would knock them over. Matthew was just hungry.

"Feli, I don't know why you're so fuckin' hung up on this guy. The campus is actually lazy with hot people and you pick one random dude you saw once."

"But I was drawn to *him*. Ve, I think I swooned when he adjusted his glasses. And you don't get to talk, Lovi. You see Antonio every day and don't think I don't see you watching him every time he turns his back. And at least I'm doing something about what I feel, unlike you two."

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" Lovino looked apocalyptic.

"Whoa, do *not* bring me into this. I'm just a helpful bystander." Also, he didn't feel anything about anyone, thank you *very* much. That thing that happened the other day was a fluke. He

hadn't suddenly felt sexual attraction for anyone else, not even Ludwig who was certainly deserving of a lustful thought or two. He had mixed feelings about the whole thing but decided not to dwell on it; it was what it was. As far as Matthew was concerned, Antonio's hot friend was his version of a unicorn; you might see one once, but never again. It would be a waste of time he didn't have trying to find him.

The two brothers, oblivious to Matthew's internal monologue, carried on.

"It *means*, Lovi, that you like him more than you're letting on and are doing nothing to about it."

"I do *not* like that tomato bastard!" Lovino said loudly, drawing the looks of a few other tables. His face turned red and he pointedly took a very large bite of pizza.

Something clicked in Matthew's head. "Wait a second. *Tomato* bastard?"

"I guess Lovi didn't tell you?" Feliciano grinned at him and Lovino took a larger bite of pizza. "Tonio's in his department, *researching tomatoes*. Ve, when Lovino introduced himself in his first botany class and said that he liked tomatoes, his oh-so-helpful professor put him in contact with Tonio."

"It isn't like I could tell someone who will probably be my major advisor 'sorry, can't meet with the person doing the most research on my subject even though you went through the effort to reach out to him very fast just because he's my team captain and I—" Lovino cut himself off sharply, to Feliciano's great amusement, before he could finish the thought.

Yikes. It seemed like the universe was conspiring against him. If Lovino didn't look so embarrassed that his eyes were watering, Matthew would have laughed at the circumstances. As it was, he said, "That's rough, buddy. But, Feli, you said he had glasses...?"

Feliciano frowned before smiling brightly. "Oh, right! He had light, almost platinum blond hair slicked back. His eyes were a surprising pale blue. Oh, and he looked like he could bench press all of us without trying too hard. He was wearing jeans, a white button-up shirt, and what looked like black boots."

Yep, that sounded like Ludwig, minus the glasses. Matthew almost shook his head. What were the odds of this happening? At least now he had a reason to be damned glad that he wasn't attracted to his study partner.

"I might know him, Feli, and he seems nice, but let me get to know him a little first before I introduce you two? He definitely seemed like the type to take to people slowly and I don't want to scare him off."

Feliciano nodded quickly. "Sure, Mattie. I trust you. Can you at least tell me his name?"

"It's Ludwig. Tell you what: why don't you swing by the library commons about 7:30 on Monday? I can introduce you in passing since we will be studying and you can tell me later if he is actually the right guy." Monday was much better than tomorrow, in Matthew's opinion.

He barely knew Ludwig and didn't want to scare off a potential friend with overeager match-making.

"Okay." Feliciano frowned a little. "What do you mean, 'studying?' We don't have any classes together and how would you know—"

"Oh, sorry. Ludwig was my assigned study partner for my psych class and we're meeting in the main library on Monday."

Lovino, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, nearly dropped his soda at the news. "Holy shit. You've got to be fucking with me right now."

"Wow, how lucky is that! What can you tell me about him? What's he studying? Which dorm does he—"

"Feli, wouldn't you want to get to know him yourself? To have Ludwig tell you?" Also, Matthew didn't feel comfortable giving away his information like that. It wasn't like it was told in confidence, but it felt like spying on someone he barely knew.

"Ve, good point, Mattie. Between me with Ludwig and Lovi with Tonio—"

"For *fuck's sake*, I'm not even interested in him!"

"—we just have to find your guy, Mattie. And Lovi, please stop saying that. We don't believe you. Thou doth protest too much," Feliciano said with a giggle.

Between the near hour of grumbling Matthew has had to endure about Antonio near daily and the oh-so-specialized nicknames, that was a safe assumption for Feliciano to make. But the other thing..."Oh, no. No, nothing has to be done about me. I saw the guy once and have no attachment to him. He's not my anything. So just forget about him because I have."

On the same side for once in that conversation, both Lovino and Feliciano looked like they didn't believe him. *Fuck*.

"Mattie, where are we sitting?" Lovino asked, like he was explaining something very elementary.

"In the cafeteria. What does that-?"

"We're sitting in the corner of the cafeteria and you're sitting with your back to the corner. You can see the entire room."

Matthew realized that they were right and he had led them to the table. "So? There's a lot of people here and this was one of the few tables left. I don't see why—"

"Ve, this is the third time in four days you've chosen this table. And there were a looooot fewer people here when we walked in."

What? "Really? Huh, I didn't realize that." Matthew got quieter, seeing where this was going. He *really* hadn't been paying attention.

"And your eyes do a scan of the room every two minutes, like goddamn clockwork. I don't even know if you mean to do it or if it's a fucking automatic response at this point."

Matthew slouched in his seat and said, "Okay, maybe I didn't forget about him. But I seriously don't have time to even worry about that. Also, for the love of God, *please* don't ask Antonio about his friend."

Feliciano snorted. "Fine. But, honestly, like we do? Ve, you gotta make time, Mattie. What's life without a little fun?"

"This idiot has a point. You can't spend all your time in practice and studying, it's just not healthy."

"That's all I did in high school." Conversations continued around them, Matthew was sure, but his two friends were silent for once, staring at him with open mouths and a steadily increasing horror. It was their quiet that was unsettling and made him feel like he could have heard a pin drop, even if that was completely illogical. "What?"

Feliciano looked at Lovino, eyes wide and face serious. "Lovi, I know you don't want to, but you have to now."

Lovino actually nodded. "I'll consider it fucking community service."

This wasn't unsettling at all. "Guys, what are you talking about?"

As one, they turned to him and Matthew has never felt as hunted as he did then. Whatever they wanted, just *no*.

"You're going to our game on Friday, right?"

"Yes..."

"Ve, then you should come to the team party afterwards."

"No."

"Ah, come on, Mattie. You'll need a break by then. Hell, we'll all need the break."

"No. It will be a team bonding thing and I don't want to get in the way of that."

"I'll ask Tonio if you can come, just to be sure. I'm sure he won't mind!"

"I hate parties, guys. I never know what to do at them and feel awkward."

Lovino snorted. "We wouldn't take you with us then fucking abandon you, Mattie. We would all hang out."

Matthew clenched his teeth in frustration. He was running out of excuses, but he *really* did not like parties. Maybe he should try to have more fun, but a college party seemed like being dropped in the middle of the ocean to learn how to swim. It didn't help that Matthew was

entirely sure if he wanted to see—okay, that was a lie. He wanted to see his unicorn again (yes, that was *exactly* how Matthew was going to think of him: beautiful, mythical, and thoroughly out of his grasp), but he didn't know if it would be wise. He also didn't know how to get them to let this go, but Matthew was a master at delay tactics. "Look, let me use this weekend to get my feet on the ground. Between classes and morning practices, I'm exhausted and it's only Tuesday. I'll use the weekend, including Friday night, to get ahead and I might go to the next party. My scholarship is both athletic and academic *and* I'm going to apply to law school. I can't get behind my first semester."

The both looked like they wanted to argue, but couldn't think of a good enough argument to counter *I can't lose my scholarship*. Lovino said, "Fine. But you have to agree to go to the next party after this one, which is after our next home game."

Matthew still hesitated. "I don't—"

"Ve, that's two weeks from now, Mattie, and before your first game. It would be a perfect time to go out with us. Plus, this gives you more time to plan ahead."

Fuck. "Okay, I'll go, but only if Antonio says it won't be a problem."

Feliciano grinned while Lovino shook his head at him. "Mattie, we've *got* to work on that damn over politeness. This is college; no one gives a shit about formality."

"Great! Lovi will ask Tonio tomorrow."

"I'll do what now?"

Lord help him.

Lovino could not fucking believe he let his brother talk him into this. He could believe even less the timing of it all.

He took a deep breath and marched himself over to where Antonio was talking to one of the new recruits, Kiku. The guy was alright and Feliciano just adored him for some reason that Lovino didn't try to understand. Kiku saw him coming and seemed to make some polite excuse to exit the conversation.

Antonio was staring after him with a confused frown when Lovino said from behind him, "Oi, bas-Antonio. Do you have a minute?"

Antonio whipped around, causing his hair to swoop to the side across his forehead. His green eyes brightened with a surprised smile and Lovino let off a stream of curses in his head. Whatever he might say aloud, his team captain was the hottest guy he had ever seen, a fact he was forcibly reminded of as he took in the sweat soaked shirt that clung to his torso. Maybe he should have asked before practice...

"Hi, Lovi! Sure, I always have a minute for you. Is it about the email I got from Dr. Johnston?"

Lovino, to his great displeasure, turned red at the statement. *Jesus, does this asshole know what that sounds like?* "Ah, no, though you really don't have to do anything about that..."

If Lovino hadn't known it wasn't true, he would have sworn Antonio cooed at him. "¡Ay, eres muy lindo, Lovi!"

"The fuck does that—"

"I want to help you. Not many people like tomatoes and it would be great to talk about them with someone."

God fucking dammit. Lovino would never turn down the chance to talk about and learn more about tomatoes. "Okay, fine, but look, I have this friend who doesn't get out much. If I can't get Mattie to take a break, I actually think the kid will fucking lose it by October. But he's super hung up on formalities and I had to double check with you to make sure we can bring friends to the after-game parties. So, is that okay?" By the time he was done talking, Lovino was looking at the ground, feeling way too awkward. It felt a little too much like asking his grandfather if a friend could come over to hang out and if Lovino hated one thing about living at home, it was having to ask permission to do the simplest things.

"Of course he can come. Everyone brings some friends out with us and—"

"Great, thanks. See you later!" He had gotten what he wanted; now seemed like the perfect time to beat a hasty retreat.

"Wait, Lovi! What does Mattie—"

Too late, bastard! Lovino was already picking his stuff up on the other side of the field and racing back to his room. Oh, right. That was why he waited until after practice. Sure, he would have inconvenient *thoughts* about that clingy shirt later, but he could now avoid Antonio indefinitely if he was careful. *Worth it.*

Matthew was sitting in the library waiting for Ludwig to arrive (he had been there for an hour or so working on other things) when his phone buzzed from its place on the table. He looked at his phone with trepidation when a text message came through. He had been dreading hearing from Lovino all day and it looked like the wait was finally over.

Lovi: ur good 4 the party + am now out of excuses bastard

Well, shit. It wasn't like he expected Antonio to say no based off of what Feliciano and Lovino had told him, but it still felt like his hopes were dashed. To distract himself, he decided to tease his friend.

Matthew: Thanks, Lovi. I'm sure Antonio was thrilled to have you ask him.

It didn't take long to get a response.

Lovi: the fuck's that supposed 2 mean

Matthew smirked and was about to type out a frustratingly vague answer when someone appeared beside him and said, "Hello, Matthew."

Matthew startled but still looked up with a smile and greeted, "Hi, Ludwig." Matthew put his phone down and switched out the reading for his Latin American history class for the abnormal psychology work. "How are you?"

Ludwig sat down and started pulling out his work. "Fine, thank you. Yourself? I did not leave you waiting for long, did I?"

"I'm alright and no, you didn't. I just thought I would snag a spot early and get to work on history readings for the week. You're right on time."

Ludwig nodded, serious even as some tension that he always seemed to be carrying left his shoulders. "Good. I hate to keep people waiting on me."

"Me, too, but you weren't late, so there's no need to worry. Now, what did you think of the homework?"

Ludwig shrugged and they got to work. It was only introductory work, but Matthew got the distinct impression that Ludwig was going to be a difficult study partner to have. It wasn't that he was going to be lazy, ignorant, or otherwise a pain, oh no. The seriousness with which he addressed each problem like this was brain surgery and not a simple assignment, the sharp and frankly intimidating intellect of his gaze, the deliberateness of his every word and movement made Matthew certain he would be the dead-weight in this semester-long partnership. Considering they were only three days into the term, this was rather disheartening to realize. At least his grade for this class was guaranteed to be good since he would be studying to work with Ludwig rather than for just being one in the hundred sitting in a lecture hall twice a week. If he managed to earn Ludwig's respect by the end of it all, he would count it as a win.

The incessant buzzing of his phone might make that difficult, however. He had tossed the phone into his backpack with a hurried apology when the first text message came through, but the vibration was still audible. At around the tenth notification, Matthew's shoulders slumped and he sighed. "Would you mind if I checked that? It's probably my roommate, his brother, or *my* brother, and I can tell all of them to stop." Thus, Matthew had listed the entirety of his contact list (besides his parents) who would bother talking to him. He decided not to dwell too much on that fact.

Ludwig offered an expression that Matthew could best describe as half of an amused smirk and half of an empathetic grimace. "Go ahead. My brother periodically bombards me with texts, especially if he knows I am busy, just to annoy me. I understand."

"Thanks," Matthew mumbled as he fished out his phone. Six messages. Great.

Lovi: Mattie what does that mean

Lovi: I dont like him

Lovi: he just has a perfect ass and im not blind dammit

Lovi: dont ignore me im telling the truth

Feli: what did you say to him he's pouting

Alfred: hey bro hows class

Matthew shook his head and said aloud, "I was wrong; it's all three of them."

"Lucky you," Ludwig said dryly, making Matthew scoff lightly. He sent three messages in quick succession.

Matthew: I didn't mean anything, Lovi. I just meant that he was happy to have you talk to him without yelling. Now stop pouting. I'm in a meeting.

Matthew: I mentioned Antonio. If he claims anything else, I'm innocent.

Matthew: Hi, Alfred. Class is fine and I'm meeting with my study partner right now. I'll text you later.

"Okay, they should stay off my back for a while...yeah, no, that's a lie. But I can now say I answered them. What else do we have to go over?"

"We are actually just about done. It really was an introductory assignment, though the length does not bode well for our workload once the class picks up."

"I know what you mean. Between my classes and practice, I think me going to the activity fair on Friday would be a waste of time. I would never have the energy to make any club meetings."

Ludwig nodded. "There are only a certain number of hours in a day. I do not want to attend either but my brother is harassing me to go. He is the president of the MMA club and has threatened to do horrible things to me if I do not stop by his table and prove I talked to at least one group."

Matthew raised his eyebrows at him. "That's impressive and it sounds like he means well, at least."

Ludwig rolled his eyes. "Do not let him hear you say that; the last thing Gilbert needs is encouragement."

"He sounds like Alfred, if more well-meaning."

"Then I am sorry. That sounds like a particular kind of hell."

Matthew shrugged. "Thanks, but it wasn't all bad. We were perfectly in sync when we were playing or practicing. We are just *very* different people off the ice."

Ludwig frowned. "You played together? I did not—" Someone shushed them, cutting Ludwig off. He sent a cold look their direction that made the student turn away quickly, but Matthew figured they had a point.

In a quiet voice, Matthew said, "Yes, we were on the same team. Schools actually tried to recruit us as a pair, but it didn't work out and I know that was for the best. Hey, since we're pretty much done anyway, do you want to head to dinner? I haven't eaten in hours and I'm starting to get uncomfortable."

Ludwig looked surprised but said, "Sure, but I'm not on a meal plan since I live at off campus and commuter plans are so expensive."

"No problem, I can just swipe you into the cafeteria. You might want to go once, just to say you've had the college experience."

With skepticism plain on his face, Ludwig acquiesced and they headed across campus to the dining hall.

After about an hour, Matthew had gotten to see the value in Ludwig's dry sense of humor, had successfully argued that his brother was *the worst*, and had made a new friend, someone to balance out the almost frantic energy that came with the Italian brothers.

Here's to hoping it would last past Matthew's clumsy attempts at matchmaking.

Did Ludwig even like guys?

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from P!nk's "Raise Your Glass."

Also, it's not luck, Feli. It's the author desperately trying to get all the players on the field.

Eyes Wide Open All the Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ludwig stepped in to the house after a surprisingly mediocre (he expected the truly horrific quality of his public school's cafeteria) dinner with Matthew. The boy was hiding a cutting wit under his shy personality and gentle demeanor and had managed to startle him into laughter a couple of times during their meal. He still had a difficult time imagining Matthew as what he assured him was an "enforcer" position on the team. Hell, the thought of his classmate in *shoulder pads* conjured images of him being drowned in extra material, sort of like a retriever puppy peeking out of a pile of human clothing.

His mouth quirked at the image as he toed off his shoes and headed into the living room. His brother, lounging on the couch with a text book in his lap looked up in greeting only to stare at him for a second too long in what appeared to be shock, expression all the more dramatic because of his unusual but familiar coloring. Then again, he wasn't naturally subtle at anything. Ludwig didn't bother waiting for his only sibling to speak first. Speaking in their native tongue he said, "Hello, Gilbert."

"West...were-were you smiling when you came in? Did something happen?" Gilbert gasped and slammed his textbook closed. "Did you meet someone?" He asked excitedly, and Ludwig winced.

"I *am* capable of interacting with people, you know." He responded, dropping his bag by the couch and continuing onward into the kitchen. He knew they had some cider in the fridge and a hot cup of it sounded perfect. It also gave him something concrete to do when his brother did the predictable thing and pushed.

"There's a difference between the ability to do something and *actively choosing not to do it*, which you do. Constantly."

Point for him. He opened the fridge and groaned. "Did you drink the last of the cider?"

"You know I don't drink that syrup, but it was probably one of the usual suspects. I'll pick up more tomorrow on my way home from work." Ludwig sighed but reached for the milk.

Gilbert's cadre of friends often came over during the week to get out of their apartments/dorms and study. They were eclectic and more than a little morally ambiguous, but Ludwig was generally unbothered by their presence. They respected his space and were good to Gilbert, helped him find balance in his otherwise insane schedule, so he couldn't really ask for more. Well, except that they replace the cider when they finish it. His brother followed him into the kitchen and continued, "You're avoiding the subject. Who'd ya meet, baby bro?" The last question was drawled in painfully American English.

"Please stop doing that and it's just my study partner for my abnormal psychology class. We had to meet to talk about our assignment and had dinner in the cafeteria afterwards."

Gilbert made a face. “You went to the Commons? Voluntarily? *After* studying. Man, you must like this person. Tell me about them. What’s their name? What are they studying? Are they single--?”

“No, Gilbert.”

“No, they’re seeing someone or—”

“No, I am not doing this. You would just hunt him down and harass him and I would lose the one friend I have managed to make so far.”

Gilbert rolled his eyes. “One, you’ve already told me everything I need to figure out who it is.” *What the fuck?* Ludwig thought, immediately alarmed. “Two, I wouldn’t harass him just because he’s hanging out with you. That’s creepy as hell and honestly, ain’t nobody got time for that—” the Americanism in English once more. “—least of all me. Finally, is it so wrong to want to hear about your life? You know all of my friends. Can’t I know just a little bit about yours? West, I’m wounded.”

Ludwig regarded him as he sipped from his freshly poured glass. Now that he was thinking about it and considering how difficult it has been in the past for him to make friends, maybe Gilbert had a right to his curiosity and his barely concealed concern. And since he had apparently already given away the keys to Matthew’s identity if Gilbert really wanted to find out... “His name is Matthew. He is a history and French major and he wants to be a lawyer. He is quiet and kind and apparently on the hockey team. I do not know if he is seeing someone as that was irrelevant to our conversation.”

Gilbert smirked at him. “That’s never irrelevant. Is he cute?”

Ludwig felt his face heat and cursed his brother’s need to tease. “Objectively, yes. But!” He said, seeing his brother light up at the confirmation and cutting him off before he could start. “I like him as a *friend*, East.”

“Hmmm...” Oh, Ludwig did not like that look. Would he never know peace? “Bring him by the MMA table on Friday so I can meet him.”

“Absolutely not!”

The question as to Ludwig’s sexuality remained unanswered by the time Matthew spoke with Feliciano next on that matter.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Feliciano asked at lunch the next day. Lovino was partially slumped over a shitty cup of coffee, exhausted and trying desperately not to listen. Matthew hoped his roommate was going to be okay between his game tomorrow and classes. While they supposedly in the middle of “syllabus week,” some professors said *fuck it* and gave them work. Turns out that after working full time, transitioning back to classes was jarring as hell.

Responding to Feliciano, he said, “I mean I don’t know, Feli. That’s not something I’m comfortable with asking him right now and it otherwise hasn’t come up.”

“What about your ‘dar?’”

Matthew squinted at him confusedly. “My what?”

“Your gaydar, duh.”

“Uh, fresh out of those. Sorry.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m really not.” Matthew had never understood how people could guess someone else’s sexuality by looking at them. The way they just *know* without talking to the person seemed about as realistic as the Force. Also, Feliciano’s ice-breaking tactics aside, how the fuck do you find out someone’s preferences just from a casual conversation? *Hi, my name is Matthew. Oh, nice to meet you. If you have a preference, what’s your favorite gender to fuck?* In what universe is that actually acceptable? Okay, maybe in a fetish setting or sex club (which Matthew was aware existed, thanks), but that was...oh, nevermind. Lovino was saying something.

“—hew! Matthew are you even—oh, thanks for tuning back in. *Anyway*, as I was telling my thirsty-as-hell brother, there will be time for that later. Like, Monday. We have other, more immediate concerns.”

Matthew felt a brief wave of panic over having forgotten something that made Lovino stop trying to take in as much caffeine as possible and look so serious. “What? What am I forgetting? Shit, did I—“

“No, no, you bastard, calm down. You didn’t forget to go to a class or leave the oven on.”

“We don’t have a—“

“It’s a metaphor, Mattie. Right now, our biggest concern is...” Lovino smiled slowly and alarm bells went off in Matthew’s head. “...If you’re not going to come with us to the team party tomorrow, what are you going to do the first Friday night of the semester?”

Matthew tensed and answered truthfully. “Go to your game?”

“And...?” Lovino asked and Feliciano leaned forward in his seat, eyes intent as they waited for the inevitable disappointment.

“...and do homework after?”

Both Lovino and Feliciano groaned and threw up their hands dramatically. Matthew couldn’t help the twitch of his mouth into smile, laughing internally. No matter what they said to him, he was sticking with his plan.

Feliciano and Lovino could goad him all they wanted. But Matthew had logic, responsibility, and relentlessness on his side. And the only person Matthew had met who was more stubborn than he was when he put his mind to it? Was his brother.

Bring it on.

Resisting the will of his two Italian friends left him feeling rundown by the end of the day. Mounting anxiety over the speed of the lecture kept him alert through psych, but he was *done*. He luckily only had one afternoon class the next day, so maybe he could take a nap between practice and class. He considered his options as he walked out of the room, only to be pleasantly surprised to find Ludwig waiting (presumably) for him outside. “Hey, Ludwig. How are you?”

“Hello, Matthew. Quite fine, thank you. Yourself?”

Matthew smiled at his formal speech and said, “I’m okay. It might be a little hypocritical of me to say but...you know you don’t have to speak formally if you don’t want to, right? I would like us to be friends and all. If you prefer to speak that way, that’s fine. Just wanted to put that out there.”

Ludwig cleared his throat and Matthew could have sworn his cheeks colored a bit. “Of course. I would like us to be friends as well. This is...just the way I talk.”

“Okay, then. I won’t mention it again.” Matthew shot him a smile he hoped was reassuring while his mind started grasping at topics to keep an awkward pause from setting in. “Are you done again for the day?”

“Yes, I am. You have French cinema, correct?” They began walking towards the other end of campus.

“Nope. I only have that once a week and am going home to do some work. I have a bit more to read for tomorrow and want to get a head start on the weekend’s work.” He would probably nap or faff about online for a while as a break, but that was the ultimate goal for the evening.

Ludwig was silent for a second, not one to fill pauses with extraneous noises, before he said, “That seems wise. Between practices, games, and classes, you probably have to plan ahead. Are you still not going to the activity fair tomorrow?”

“Um, actually I’ll probably be forced along. My roommate and his brother are...active in their concern about my lack of social life and have asked me to at least attend to at least see what clubs there are. Why do you ask?”

Ludwig grimaced and Matthew blinked at the expression. If his new friend showed emotion or physically reacted to something, there was usually a reason for it. “I mentioned you to my brother last night and now he is rather annoyingly insistent that you show up at his club’s table tomorrow. As my friend, I am asking that you stay far away from the MMA club’s station if you do decide to attend.”

Matthew coughed to stifle his giggle. “Ludwig, you have to know that saying that mostly makes me intensely curious about the club.” When he blinked at him, Matthew grinned. “I’ll keep my distance, but I won’t act like I don’t know you if I see you and I will probably walk past the table once or scope it out. Is that fair?”

Ludwig gave a gusty sigh but Matthew saw a small crinkle at his eyes and a slight uptick of the corner of his mouth. “Fair enough.”

“I’m still not quite getting why you’re so gung-ho all of a sudden to go to this,” Lovino half-heartedly griped. He was pleased Matthew had come with him to look at what clubs first-years could join, but he was still unclear on his friend’s thought process. “You still don’t want to join anything, even though *it’s the right thing to do*. You fucking need community involvement, leadership or some shit like that to get into law school, right? So you *need to pick something* and *stick with it*. But, no, why do something for actual reasons when you can maybe meet your new best friend’s brother?”

“Lovi, that’s ridiculous,” Matthew said, smiling benignly. “*You’re* my new best friend. I am going to pick something to commit to, but that has nothing to do with whether I actually want to do it. And I’m mostly here because Ludwig specifically tried to keep me away. I will avoid his brother as requested, but a little curiosity never hurt anyone.”

“Pretty sure there’s a saying about cats that disagrees with you.”

“Nope. *Curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction brought it back.*”

Lovino stopped walking just as they approached the crowded and noisy line of tables arraigned under a tent on one of the university’s quads. A thought occurred and he stared at his friend. “You contrary *bastard*. You’re only here because he asked you not to be.”

Matthew shrugged. “I can have multiple reasons for doing something. You were right that I do need to pick something for law school.”

“No, you stubborn ass. You’re here because you were specifically warned against it. God, is *this* why you won’t come out with us tonight? Fuck, you probably aren’t even going to work, are you? I know you’re ahead because of last night, so don’t even play. Now you’re just staying in because you said you would.”

Matthew winced. “Well, not really? I need to—“

Lovino burst out laughing, half not believing the situation, half relieved that Matthew had some kind of personality flaw. He knew there had to be something besides the occasional snark and it made his friend more human rather than the perfect student that he tried to make himself out to be. *Future lawyer; indeed*, he thought. “You better be happy I like you, you bastard,” he said, fond.

Matthew grinned at him. “I’m endlessly grateful for that fact, Lovi. Now, come on; let’s get this over with. Two minutes max per table, remember.”

“Remember? Bitch, I *set* the schedule.” Neither of them wanted to be here for a long time and Lovino still had to get ready for his game, aka to *kick some ass!*

They braved the first aisle of tables and into the crowd of chattering students. It was so cluttered it was difficult to see what each club was offering. Lovino knew he was scowling as he tried to push through the rows of students and had the distinct thought, *I’m too old for this.*

It wasn’t like he had aged significantly in the two years between high school and now, but he certainly felt disconnected from most of the other first years. They’re all so...eager and fresh. They all remind him a bit too much of his brother. Working and managing finances while Feliciano finished up school had left him bitter and he often thanked the random roommate fairies that Matthew was his roommate instead of one of the overly ambitious coeds that had pre-planned what frats and clubs they were going to join before arriving. For all his unhealthy work-ethic, Matthew was by far the most laid back and self-aware first year he had met.

There was a tug at his sleeve and he looked up to meet Matthew’s eyes. “Lovi, do you want to stop at the Italian club table?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Hell, no. If I wanted to be reminded of Italy I would call my grandfather.” He turned his gaze to the table array once more and paused as he spotted a patch of greenery. *Community Gardening*, their sign said. “I’ll go check out the green thumbs over there. Those are my people.”

Matthew smiled. “Okay, I’ll catch up with you in a second. I’ll investigate the French conversation club.”

He nodded and set off on his own towards the group’s table. He didn’t really know how to start a conversation politely, so he just walked up, met the eyes of a smiling girl he had never seen before and said, “What does this club do?”

While Lovino internally cringed at the statement, it set the green-eyed girl off on an excited explanation of gardening, sustainability, open community access to food, and he was sold. He felt good enough about his decision to sign up that he shot her (Bella) his most charming smile and a promise to show up at their introductory meeting next week.

Feeling rather self-satisfied, he wandered back over to Matthew and saw he was chatting hesitantly in French with one of the students at the table. He sidled up to him and (after checking that Matthew had already written his name down on the sign-up sheet) said, “Would you look at the time, we’ve got to go!”

Lovino pulled Matthew back into the stream of people by his arm and heard his hasty goodbye to the person he was talking with. Then he heard him laughing. “Lovi, you didn’t have to do that. You could have just poked me or something.”

“Sure, but where’s the fun in that. Besides, you should have seen the faces of the people around us. Anyway, we still have at least two more rows to walk down and I—“

“Lovi!” Lovino knew that voice, knew that tone, and froze. They were situated at the end of the first aisle, far too visible to duck behind anywhere or melt back into the crowd. He felt his

face heat as Matthew frowned in confusion at first then smiled mischievously as Antonio walked over to them, waving. He hated himself a little as he took in the approaching form, and admired him a bit too much for his own comfort. The man was *fit*. He met those deep green eyes and felt his mouth twist to the side in a half grimace-half pout.

“Yeah?” Lovino answered, crossing his arms in front of him, feet spread apart and hip cocked. “What do you want, Tomato Bastard? Don’t you see enough of me as it is?”

“Aw, I just wanted to say hi! I never see you outside of the lab or practice. Are you excited for our game?” Antonio asked, his vowels rolling and hair swept across his face with a lazy flick of his head. He stared back at Lovino as he asked the question, attention focused fully on him to the point that he felt the need to look away.

Damn him, he thought testily as he forced out, “Sure, I guess.” Lovino was actually hyper-competitive and was *psyched* for the game, but Antonio didn’t need to know that.

Matthew coughed to poorly conceal his laughter, probably because he knew the truth of the matter since he had been talking about the game for most of the day. It was a shitty attempt but Lovino appreciated it all the same.

“Hey, is this your friend?” Antonio asked and before Lovino had a chance to reply he looked at Matthew and stuck out his hand. “Hi, I’m Antonio! Lovi and I play on the soccer team together.”

“Really? You don’t say,” Matthew said coyly as they shook and Lovino was about to fucking lose it. “I’m Matthew. Lovi and I are roommates.”

Antonio blinked at his friend then smiled. “Oh, so *you’re* Mattie! It’s nice to meet you and you should definitely feel free to come to our after-game party. Friends of players are always welcome! In fact, come by tonight!”

“Um,” Matthew said, clearly startled at the invitation and Lovino saw the opportunity for what it was.

“Yeah, Mattie. Come to the party. It’s only the first Friday of the semester; you should relax.” Lovino’s tone was sugary sweet. The look Matthew shot him was not.

“I’m sorry, I have something else planned,” his friend demurred and Lovino narrowed his eyes at him. He would bet money that those plans, if written down, were *do nothing/piss Lovino off*. “I will be attending the game, however.

“Oh, I see my friend from class. I should go say hi and leave you two alone,” Matthew continued, eyes darting to somewhere over Antonio’s shoulder and Lovino felt a wave of disbelief that his *friend* was doing this to him. “Nice to meet you, Antonio, and good luck at the game!”

Matthew scurried off and Lovino watched him go, curious as to if his other friend was the one his brother was so intent on speaking to and feeling a little betrayed for being left alone

with his team captain. He looked back at said person when he said, "You're coming tonight, right?"

"Of fuckin' course. It my *team's* party."

Antonio smiled at him and his traitorous hormones sent a thrill through him at the sight.

"That's great, Lovi. It will be nice to hang out with you."

He felt his face become beet red and just *knew* he was being messed with. "Why are you teasing me? I honestly don't get it. Is it because I'm older than the other students? Is that it?"

"What? No, of course not." Antonio stepped closer and Lovino realized that the captain's most dangerous expression was not his smile. "We're the same age, Lovi, so why would that be an issue for me? And I would never tease you about this."

His heart was beating a worrying tempo in his chest and his mind was screaming *abort, abort, abort!* He looked down and stepped back, ceding ground but needing the space as he searched for some way out of the conversation. His eyes caught and held on who Matthew was talking to about thirty meter's away and he grabbed his outrage with both hands. "Oh, *hell* no. *That's* who Feli is interested in?"

The guy was standing tall with a stiff posture and stern face. The blond hair was slicked back and the eyes were an unfriendly, glacial blue. There was absolutely nothing inviting about him, not to mention the fact he looked like he could break his little brother over his knee without even trying. *Oh*, that was *not* a good mental image.

The topic seemed to catch Antonio's interest as well. He turned to spot Matthew only to begin laughing. Without explaining what was so funny, he took out his phone and snapped a picture of Matthew and his *other* friend. Lovino was not amused. "What's so fucking funny?"

Antonio's fingers were flying over his phone as his laughter died down. "So many things. You said Feli likes Ludwig?"

"Possibly, to be confirmed. But, wait, you know him?" Lovino narrowed his eyes at the new information. How could Antonio possibly know him? How did *everyone* but Lovino know this bastard?

"Oh, yes. Ludwig is one of my best friend's younger brother. *And* he's friends with *Matthew*? Oh, this is perfect. Gilbert had been curious about who his brother was hanging out with and now he'll know. See?" Antonio showed Lovino his phone screen. He saw a group message called *Four Horsemen** and a picture of Matthew smiling at this Ludwig character. Already there were dots dancing on screen as someone was typing a reply and something about the name struck him. *Four* people, huh.

"Hey, Antonio? Does Ludwig's brother happen to be a tatted up albino? And does he happen to be in the area?"

Antonio whipped his head around and stared at him. Meanwhile, his phone received a messages in quick succession: first from a "D" which read *unfuckingbelievable*, then from a

"F" which went with *rotfl*, and finally from "W" which just said, *FUCK*. "Yeah, actually. How did you...?"

Lovino felt his mouth widen in a wicked smile and said, "Think you could get him to just happen upon his brother so he can introduce himself to Mattie?" *Two can play that game, Matthew*. "Let me explain a bit about my dear, dear roommate..."

Matthew was chatting with Ludwig about clubs he was considering participating in when his friend looked to the side and visibly stiffened. Matthew frowned and followed his gaze only to see a laughing Antonio and a far too smug Lovino. *That's not a good sign*. He asked, "Ludwig, what's wrong?"

"I see one of my brother's friends. At events like this, if you see one of them, the rest usually are not far behind."

"Wait, are you talking about Antonio?" A thread of trepidation spread through him and he remembered the first time he saw the soccer player...and his three friends.

Ludwig looked back at him with wide eyes. "You know him?"

"Sure, just met him. He's talking to my roommate. But seriously, what's wrong? You make them sound like a plague or something." *Please, God, let me be wrong. Don't let my new friend's brother be my unicorn. I'm not prepared for this*. It was one thing to see his unicorn again, just to prove to himself that someone like that actually existed, but it was completely another to be introduced to him. His mind was spinning, somehow doubting that Ludwig was related to the redhead from Antonio's table, so that just left the blond and—

"You are not far off. We should go—"

"Aw, West." Came a low, amused voice and Matthew almost had an out of body experience as a tall, *pale*, and muscled man dressed in a black tank top and low sitting distressed jeans appeared from behind the mass of Ludwig's body to sling an easy arm around Ludwig's neck and pull him into a hug. His hair shone light silver in the sunlight, darkly tinted lenses hiding eyes he knew to be red. Oh, God, this was really happening. "That's no way to talk about your beloved brother."

His friend all but growled, "Gilbert—"

But Gilbert (*he had a name, he was real, what am I doing here?*) continued like he hadn't spoken. "And who is this? Your friend from psych, perhaps?" Gilbert's accent wasn't as heavy as Ludwig's. It was more relaxed, almost lyrical in that tone and oh, shit, he was talking about him!

"Ah, yes!" *Calm down! Stay cool*, he told himself, while freaking out. "I'm Matthew. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. I'm Gilbert." He disengaged from Ludwig and offered his hand to shake. Matthew was reaching for it before he knew what was happening and could only hope his

palm wasn't sweaty. He did his best to smile as they shook, and he felt immediately as if Gilbert was weighing him with his covered eyes. He suddenly felt woefully underdressed in his plain blue t-shirt and jeans and felt a light blush rise to his cheeks. Gilbert's lips moved to form a small smirk and his face fucking *flared*. *Goddammit*.

The handshake ended after a respectable amount of time and Matthew cleared his throat. He needed to regroup and be away from this conversation *fast*. "I should go; my friend and I—" He gestured towards where Lovino and Antonio had been standing, but kept his focus on the brothers in front of him. "—are on a tight schedule. See you on Monday, Ludwig?"

Ludwig's eyes were darting between him and his brother, but he said with pursed lips, "Of course. Have a good weekend, Matthew."

He smiled and couldn't help flicking his eyes to Gilbert before getting the *fuck* out of there.

As he walked away at a carefully measured pace, he heard Gilbert call out, "See you around, Matthew."

He managed only *just* managed to trip over his own feet.

"You said he was cute. You didn't say he looked like *that*," his brother said to him in German as he watched his shy friend walk away. Ludwig, already disturbed by what he had seen pass between the two of them and the overly self-satisfied duo Matthew was walking towards, could only sigh and slap his brother upside his head. Gilbert barely flinched. "What?"

"Leave him alone or so help me—"

"Relax, West. It would take more than a pretty, pretty face for me to go for a freshman. Although... something tells me he could more than handle himself. He plays hockey, you said?"

Oh, he did not like where this was going *at all*. He grabbed the back of his brother's neck and hauled him back towards the tables. "Aren't you supposed to be at a *table* or something?"

"I was summoned and so I appeared," he stated simply, saluting Antonio with his phone and continuing his running gag about being a demon. And *that* played rather worryingly off of he and his friends' reputation of being the campus' Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Well, horsepeople but Alistair apparently recognized the power of a brand and wasn't bothered. Gilbert focused again on him and asked, "So, what are you two doing on Monday?"

"*Studying*."

"Are you sure?"

He knew his brother was just doing it to get a rise out of him but he couldn't help running a hand over his face. Gilbert's resulting laughter only confirmed that he was going to be insufferable.

Lovino smiled as Matthew approached him, Antonio still at his side for some reason. “How was your chat?”

Matthew’s eyes flashed in quickly banked annoyance before sliding over to Antonio and saying pointedly, “How was yours?” *Touché*. His smug expression fell and he felt Antonio’s eyes on him. They had taken mutual satisfaction in watching Matthew and Gilbert interact, and Gilbert clearly watching Matthew after he left. It made Lovino feel like he and his captain were a little too comfortable together for his emotional health.

He made a show of checking his phone for the time and said, “Looks like we need to get moving.” *Truce?* He silently asked Matthew, hoping he saw it for the olive branch it was.

“You know, I had the exact same thought,” Matthew said with a small smile. *Of course*.

“Food?”

“Food. Nice to meet you, Antonio.” With that, the two of them walked away from the activity fair, leaving a slightly confused Antonio behind.

When they were out of his earshot, Lovino said, “Soooo? His name is Gilbert?”

Matthew slumped a little and blushed. “His name is Gilbert.”

Chapter End Notes

Haha, looks like the only time I can overcome writer’s block is when finals are upon me. Fucking typical me. Anyway, in case y’all couldn’t guess, Ludwig will be a founding member of the Matthew Williams Defense Squad. The other is Lovino, of course, with the vice president being Feliciano. More will join the cause.

Also, Lovi is a great friend, but we all know deep down he’s that messy bitch who lives for drama. (Where do you think Feli got if from?)

To be fair to Matthew, he had no less than seven (7) reasons for going to check out clubs with Lovi.

Next chapter: Hockey, love, and other things that make you want to punch a wall.

Chapter Title Song: “I Walk the Line” by Halsey (cover of Johnny Cash)

Chapter 4: Like I Didn't Know

Chapter Notes

Spamano chapter, with some relatively tame sex. Keep in mind, this is just how the relationship starts.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lovino was in a generous mood.

Why?

Because they had fucking *rocked* the game that's why! Fuckers didn't even know what hit them!

He was feeling so generous, he didn't try to get Matthew to come with them to the after-party one last time after dropping his stuff off at home and showering/changing. That didn't mean he wasn't going to keep him apprised of what a great time he was missing out on.

Lovino: u should have been here what r u even doing rn?

Mattie: Finishing my homework. And if you were having such a great time, you wouldn't be texting me.

Rude. Kind of accurate.

Lovino: Mattie it's fuckin midnight stop that

Lovino: and is it so wrong 2 want my bf with me?

Mattie: Are we dating now?

He looked at that again. *Fuck.*

Mattie: Antonio will be so disappointed.

Lovino: I MEANT BEST FRIEND, BFF

Lovino: fuck u

Mattie: I'm getting mixed messages here.

Mattie: You should direct those messages to Antonio.

Mattie: So I can finish my work and actually have the weekend free after practice tomorrow.

Lovino: U take that back!

Mattie: Nah. It's just us, Lovi. You're down to...how did you say it?

Lovino: Hoe, don't do it

Mattie: Bounce on his dick?

Lovino: omg

"Ve, who're you texting? Mattie?" Feliciano sidled up to Lovino suddenly, craning his neck to look at Lovino's phone and drink sloshing dangerously in his stereotypical red plastic cup. Before he could blank his screen, his little brother snatched the device away, scrolling up through his messages.

"What the fuck, Feli!" Lovino grouched, grabbing for his phone only to have Feliciano dance away, smile growing on his face. "No fucking manners, no goddamn *couth*. I did not raise you to be like this."

"Yes, you did, Lovi." Satisfied, Feliciano helpfully gave his phone back and Lovino saw there was a new message.

Mattie: You're just mad I'm right. We both know you like him and not just because he has the most perfect ass you've ever seen. I'm quoting you here.

Lovino: damn Mattie why r u coming for me like this

"So...." Feliciano trailed off, a little drunkenly. They both could drink a bottle of wine and not blink due to their upbringing, but however many liquors were in the punch bowl reserved for the team and whoever the makeshift bartender (a junior forward named Luciano) deemed worthy were far from their normal fare. Lovino took his cup and sniffed, recoiling instantly from the smell.

"Jesus, how are you drinking this? It smells like paint thinner and Kool-Aid."

"It's really sweet! The key is not to breathe when you drink it. And don't change the subject. Did you really say that?" Feliciano was looking at him seriously, the gold of his irises visible. He really meant business, then.

"So what if I did?" he grumbled. He took a sip from Feliciano's cup, scowling only to grimace at the overly sweet drink. You couldn't taste the alcohol at all...which was a bad sign.

"Get your own," Feliciano said, taking the cup back and gulping down a large mouthful in a move that had Lovino immediately worrying about his younger brother's liver. On second thought, as long as he made sure he didn't get serious alcohol poisoning, Feliciano could survive a cheap-liquor hangover. Let him learn from experience. "And it matters because he

likes you, too! He's standing literally across the room. While you've been holding up the wall, he keeps looking over here, which you would have noticed if you left Mattie in peace and looked up from your phone once in a while."

He'd been doing a pretty good job pretending like he wasn't aware of Antonio whenever he was in his possible field of vision, but bringing him up had Lovino's eyes flashing to their fearless leader. He looked more carelessly perfect than usual, comfortable in the space and wearing a light blue button-up and relaxed jeans, veering from the more popular (and Godawful) pastel shorts that everyone and their brother seemed to be wearing now. Lovino looked away before his brother could call him out of blatantly staring. "I like holding up this wall. I'm good at it." Lovino mumbled.

The truth was...he hated parties, especially if he was sober and knew no one else there. Sure, it was his team's party and he was happy to be there but he honestly hadn't hit it off with a lot of people since coming to school and knew he was difficult to deal with for anyone who wasn't Matthew. He was also aware that he was different than a lot of the other first years. He was more mature than many of the upperclassmen, but they still treated him like a freshmen. Fair enough, but he was either too jaded or too new to fit neatly into any social circle at the moment. Hopefully joining the gardening club would help, but it was still the first week of school. He had tired of the same introductory conversation that everyone had with each other by the first day of classes. You know the one: *oh where are you from, what's your major, which dorm do you live in, what clubs do you want to join, etc.* Thank God for Matthew. He might have really felt like a fish out of water if his roommate had been anyone else.

"*Fratello*, the wall doesn't need your help. Come on, let's get you a drink."

No, nononono. Feliciano started pulling him from the wall towards the punch and Lovino's eyes widened. This was *not* a good idea. "How about no? No fucking way. No more liquor for me. That is a bad idea."

"Why? You're a nice drunk." Feliciano had never seen Lovino liquor drunk. Wine drunk, he was relaxed and talkative. Friendly, even. *Liquor* drunk...he was slutty as hell.

"Is there wine?" Lovino asked, already knowing the answer. This was a college party; there was no wine in the building.

"Nope! Just the punch, the keg, and the really hard stuff. It gets better after the first cup. No more aftertaste!"

Probably because you can't feel your tongue. Lovino would rather walk over broken glass than voluntarily consume the swill in the keg, but liquor was dangerous in a way he wasn't prepared to deal with. "One of us should be sober."

Feliciano shrugged. "Suit yourself. I just thought since you took a sip of mine, you wanted to. At least you're no longer attached to the architecture. Ve, let's mingle!" *Ugh.*

The party was being held at a house that a number of the older team members rented together, including Antonio. They were just on the edge of the campus bubble, relatively close to frat row, but far enough away to avoid most of the shit show. It was a three story monstrosity that

fit into the more upscale neighborhood immediately next to campus. Lovino understood why it housed seven of his teammates; they had to have the numbers just to make rent, let alone the utilities...Meh, it was probably still cheaper than living on campus.

Lovino hated mingling. It was draining, he wasn't good at it, and he was way too sober to be comfortable making small talk. Next time, he was bringing a bottle of wine for himself or pre-gaming *hard*. He had a stash stored away in his tiny closet to last him until March rolled around and he was finally legal in this ridiculous country. Matthew didn't know about it, but he doubted the guy would care all that much. He wasn't as uptight about rules as Lovino would have expected for an aspiring lawyer.

Lovino made it through standing on the sidelines of Feliciano's conversations twice, managing to make appropriate noises at the right time, before he broke. "I'm getting a drink." If he only had half a cup, it might make things more bearable without making him lose all his inhibitions. It would only be half a cup.

Feliciano smiled as Lovino separated from him, weaving his way to the alcohol while checking his phone. He was prickly, but he wasn't rude enough to check it while he was supposed to be in an active conversation with people.

Mattie: Because you're my friend and I'm trying to get you out of your own way.

Mattie: Tell me you actually don't want him or give me a reason and I'll stop. But you like him, he likes you. From where I'm sitting, it's not complicated.

Mattie: I'm going to sleep now. Call if you need something.

Lovino sighed and put his phone away. It was complicated by the fact that Antonio was both his team captain and his unofficial peer mentor in his major. He was nice and they had clicked earlier in the day and *Lord*, but he wanted him physically. The way that boy *moved* on the field...

But one thing he didn't like was awkwardness. If Lovino let himself even consider the possibility of hooking up with him or sleeping with Antonio, there was a high probability it would be a one-time thing. Which would be fine, in theory, as it might get the boy out of his system. But Lovino had the feeling it would do the opposite for him. And one thing he wouldn't be able to stand would have Antonio avoid him or look through him when they had to interact so much just to get through the week. It was one thing if Antonio lost interest in him after one night together and they never saw each other again. It was another to see the apathy every day.

Lovino *hated* being morose, especially over a stupid thing like who he was attracted to. He knew he thought too much about things like this, but that didn't make him any less right. The attraction would fade over a couple of weeks. He just had to wait it out. Prolonged exposure was the key. Antonio would do something to kill his raging hard-on for him and Lovino would be glad for his restraint.

Right.

He approached the drinks and smiled at Luciano. He was the keeper of the mood-bettering alcohol; Lovino could muster a little cheer for him. "Hey, Lu."

The Brazilian smiled at him, no sign of his fiery temper that made him so effective in the game. "Lovino! Joining us degenerates, I see!"

Lovino shrugged. "Well, since no one else seemed to care about the fact we're supposed to stay dry..."

"Oh, that," Luciano said, rolling his eyes a little. Lovino looked the boy over. They were probably the same age and the forward was certainly worth his attention, looks-wise. They were the same height, Luciano with dark brown hair and rich brown eyes, athletic in the way they all were and...no. Lovino stopped that thought; he would *not* sleep his way through the queer members of the team. Lovino was not going to be that person. "As long as it doesn't impact your performance, no one really checks. Since this was our first win, you basically have a free pass. If you're going to get wasted, this is the time to do it until the season ends."

Lovino winced. "Being wasted is the last thing I need. Can I just have like half a cup of the punch?"

Luciano shrugged, "Yeah, sure." He ladled two scoops of the nearly florescent red liquid into a cup and handed it to him. There was a loud noise from the front of the house, then shouts of greeting. Luciano grinned at him as he passed Lovino the cup. "You might want to down that before the cops get here."

"Why do you say that?" He took a sip from his cup, a little more full than he wanted it to be, but it was fine. A ripple of tension and palpable excitement went through the room to Lovino's great confusion.

"I keep forgetting you're a first year. Let me explain something about our captain." Luciano leaned over his makeshift counter, eyes dancing with amusement. "He wasn't expecting to be leading the team this year. Yeah, he's damn good, but a senior named Francisco was supposed to have the title. Because everyone knew this, Tonio and three of his friends made a bit of a name for themselves last year. Wherever they showed up for a party, there was only an hour, maybe two at most before the campus police were called."

"Okay, then how did they keep getting in to parties if they tended to shut them down?"

"Because before the cops show it's the best two hours of the night. Everyone started taking their arrival as permission to let loose, so things get crazy pretty fast. For upperclassmen, having all four of them in one place is a sign that things are about to get wild."

Four of them, Lovino thought. Then he remembered what the group message was called on Antonio's phone. "The Horsemen. That's what they're called, right?" The music that Lovino had only been marginally aware was in the background cut out for a moment. Then it was replaced with something that had a deep, thrumming beat that made Lovino blink in surprise.

"Yep, after the apocalypse variety. Death just changed the music. They're the redhead. Famine's the blond and best wingman you'll ever find. War's the one with silver hair and can

beat you in *any* drinking game, so don't even try. Also, he can end any fight just by walking up to it now."

"So, Antonio..." Lovino said, drinking absently from his cup. The taste really wasn't bad after the first shock of it.

Luciano's grin sharpened and he lowered his voice as he leaned in, just a little. "Pestilence. You need a drug, he's your guy. He's the middleman for a lot of dealers in the area, never selling personally but he's the best connection to have if you're looking for something recreational. He draws the line at the hard stuff and has been rumored to personally ruin the lives of people who used date rape drugs. That's what we think happened to Francisco, but no one's been able to confirm it."

"Huh." Lovino, went to take another sip, only to find that he had knock back the remainder of his punch. That had gone quickly. Too quickly. "What the hell is in this?"

Luciano straightened and winked at him. "Alcohol. You want another?" A group of young women dressed in...well, he wasn't exactly sure what to call them, but they reminded him of the pennies they wore during practice. Anyway, the girls were approaching them and his teammate turned a bright smile towards them.

He shouldn't but... "Yeah. Just a little, though." He could handle it, if it was only another half of a cup. "Do you have any water back there?"

Luciano laughed as he took his cup. "Nope!"

Lovino watched him proceed to fill his cup to the top. "Lu!"

"It's your first team party, Lovino. Enjoy it a little." The junior turned towards the women and Lovino sulkily sipped from his cup as he moved away. The atmosphere in the house had completely shifted, becoming more intense and seductive to match the music. His first instinct was to find Feliciano.

Once he meandered his way slowly back to the living room, watching the party evolve in fascination, he found the area turned into one mass of grinding bodies, a makeshift dance floor. If his little brother was in there, he didn't want to find him just yet. He looked around the room for someone he wouldn't mind standing near if not talking to, when his eyes landed on Antonio. He was talking with his friends animatedly, smiling and gesturing and Lovino wanted to know what his smile tasted like.

Whoa! The thought had him recoiling, blinking as he shook his head, turning his eyes away from Antonio. They found a group of female students looking at the Horsemen with appreciative eyes and Lovino decided he needed to find the kitchen. He needed to dump the rest of the drink down the sink and fill the cup with water. He hated to waste the alcohol (even if it was something cheap like Everclear) but that one thought was innocent compared to what he would be thinking if he allowed himself to drink the rest.

Lovino turned and went deeper into the house. Maybe it had been too long since he had drunk any serious amount of alcohol, but it was starting to feel like there was fire in his veins,

pulsing with every beat of his heart. The feeling was familiar, was a sign that he'd had *just enough* to be a little freer with his affections than he would normally be. Considering how fast the shift had been and the fact that his current drink cup was now half empty (when did *that* happen?), he needed a glass of water.

He strode to the kitchen with purpose, trying to ignore the want in his body. It wasn't like it had been too long since he'd last been laid. He had had a friend with benefits back home and she had given him a wonderful send off only three weeks ago. It wasn't like he was in a drought.

Of course, out of all the counter space in the kitchen (which was a nice size for the house), the couple currently making out in it decided to stand in front of the sink. Lovino didn't care; he was a man on a mission. "Could you two move three feet in either direction? Maybe get a room? You're blocking the sink."

The girl shifted them over about one foot, but it gave him access so whatever. He poured out his drink, rinsed the cup, and then filled it with water, all the while awkwardly standing next to an otherwise engaged couple. *I am both too sober and too drunk for this situation.*

Lovino walked back to the living room, considering his options. He didn't want to leave yet, especially not without at least checking on Feliciano once. He checked his phone to make sure that he hadn't texted him, and there were no new messages. He was horny, but needed to stay away from Antonio because he would *definitely* do something regrettable. Maybe he could find someone else? There were plenty of girls here and at least *some* boys that swung his way. The problem with finding guys in this setting was making sure they weren't on his team, so a girl would be his best bet. It had been a while since he had been with a guy, but he didn't mind. Girls were awesome. Lovino surveyed the room, finding his previous spot on the wall conveniently empty as he sipped at the water and leaned against it.

"Hey." Lovino turned his head to see a tall, *built* guy looking at him. He had light brown skin, dark hair and eyes, and well maintained five-o'clock shadow. He was handsome, smiling at him, and Lovino smiled back.

"Hi." More like *hello!* Maybe it was possible to find a boy for the night after all. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet. I'm Sadiq Adnan," he said, offering his hand. Lovino straightened and took it.

"Lovino Vargas." They shook and the strength in his hand had Lovino's hormones standing at attention. "You're not on my team."

"No, I'm not. Is that a problem?" Sadiq hadn't released his hand, so they were just maintaining the contact.

"The exact opposite." Lovino made his smile wicked, inviting. "You want to dance?"

"No, he doesn't." Antonio appeared by Lovino's side, startling him. He was close enough that Lovino felt the heat coming off of his body and Lovino's id reminded him who it *really* wanted. "Why are you in my house, Sadiq?"

Sadiq smiled at him and it was mocking, almost cruel. Lovino pulled his hand back. "It's a party, Antonio. I came to have fun."

"Get out." Lovino had never heard that cold fury in Antonio's voice before. He looked at him and saw his eyes focused, jaw clinched into an expression that Lovino hadn't thought Antonio capable of. He *hated* Sadiq for some reason and that immediately made Lovino wary of the other boy.

Sadiq raised his hands in surrender. "I'm gone. You want to come with me, Lovino?"

Antonio tensed beside him but Lovino said, "No, I think I'll stay here." He shifted minutely towards Antonio and felt a hand come to rest on his lower back in response. He shuddered a little at the touch and immediately regretted it.

Sadiq looked between the two of them and said wryly, "Suit yourself."

He left then without further protest and Lovino turned towards Antonio. "You want to tell me what that was about?"

"We had a disagreement freshman year. He holds a grudge." *Looks like you do, too.* Antonio dropped his hand from Lovino's body, fingers brushing his hip on the way down. Any lingering anger drained from his face as he smiled at Lovino from the edge of his personal space. "Are you having fun?"

"Not yet," Lovino automatically replied, voice a little too leading, eyes a little too leering. He cleared his throat and looked away from the intelligent, enchanting green eyes, taking a large gulp of water. The slow, grinding beat of the music and Antonio's proximity with the alcohol made him hyper aware of the other boy and the pounding of his heart. *I should leave.*

"Why not?" Antonio stepped closer, asking in as intimate a tone as possible with the background noise of the party. He should push him away, raise a fuss over the blatant teasing and storm out of this situation but...

Antonio was looking at him like he was the only person in the room. He distantly remembered Matthew and Feliciano's words, about how his team captain wanted him and... He licked his lips and said, "I don't really like parties if I don't know people."

"You know people, Lovi. We're your team." Lovino shrugged, looked away. "You know me."

"And I've been avoiding you." Lovino answered casually, only to turn red at the admission. That was entirely too truthful and he needed to *leave*. But Antonio leaned into his space and Lovino was caught in his gravity, couldn't escape it. He was now on a collision course he was no longer sure if he wanted to alter.

"Why's that? I thought we were friends." Antonio had put on some kind of cologne before the party and the heady richness of it was filling Lovino's already scrambled senses.

"You're smart, Tonio. You can guess why." Lovino said, swaying closer to him before pressing himself against the wall to his back, struggling to remember clearly this was a bad

idea. The effort was not aided by his brain helpfully supplying all the ways they could have fun together sans clothing. For example, what would it be like to run his tongue down the muscles of his stomach, along the V of his hips, and just—

"No, I think you need to spell it out for me, Lovi." Antonio moved just a little bit closer and leaned over him. Lovino tipped his chin up to maintain eye contact and he continued, "What are you thinking?"

"How much I...I—" Lovino cut himself off, breathing heavily and obviously. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed hard, trying to put a leash on his hormones, on the lust that was ruling him. He needed to do something...

Antonio touched his hand, dragged his fingers lightly down his palm and along his wrist, the light touch sending shocks of awareness through him. "Do you want to dance?"

Fuck it.

Lovino opened his eyes, having made his decision, and smiled slowly at the taller boy. Consequences were a problem for Future Lovino. Right now he was horny, being hit on by someone he had been lusting after for two weeks, and just intoxicated enough to make only the present matter. He ran his free hand up Antonio's arm and saw the surprise in his eyes. "If you want to, but I had something else in mind."

Antonio blinked at him and put his hands on his hips. Lovino was now determined to have the time of his life. "Like what?"

Lovino lazily shifted his hand to trace down the path of Antonio's shirt buttons. "Something that involves a bed and privacy."

Antonio leaned down to say in his ear, "I have my own bedroom."

Lovino felt his smile turn just a little evil. Antonio had no clue what he was like in bed, but Lovino was going to blow his mind. "Show me."

Antonio didn't waste time, taking his hand and walking towards the stairs Lovino had seen. Feliciano was standing by the foot of the staircase around the corner from the living room, chatting with Kiku. He saw his brother see him, took in Antonio leading him up the stairs, and grinned at him. He even went as far as to give him a thumbs up. Lovino felt the blush come as a natural response, but was also to the point of shamelessness, so he rolled his eyes and climbed the stairs. The sounds of the party faded into the background as they made it onto the second floor and started moving down the hall. There were a couple of people lingering in the corridor, but Lovino forced himself to not pay too much attention to them. Instead, he looked at Antonio, knowing he would finally find out if his hair was as soft as it looked and what he looked like as he came and what his body would feel like against his.

Antonio stopped in front of a door, pulled out a key from his pocket, and unlocked it. He pulled Lovino in then immediately closed the door and pushed him against it. The action sloshed water from the cup Lovino was still holding over both of them and Antonio flinched back. "Shit, sorry."

Lovino shrugged. "It's just water." He drank the little that was left and set it on the desk that was in reaching distance of the door. Antonio was back in front of him, one hand tipping his chin up while the other locked the door with a click. The sound signaled to him that they were finally alone, but Antonio was just looking at him from the short distance rather than doing something that they both wanted. "What? Is something on my face?"

"No," Antonio said, other hand coming to Lovino's hip and his body now pressing his into the door. Lovino gasped at the sensation, hands coming up to hold him closer. "I'm still surprised. You're sober, right?"

"Pretty close. I didn't have much to drink. I want to be here, Antonio." Whatever reasons he had for why he *shouldn't* be here had absolutely nothing to do with what he wanted. "Don't you?"

"Yes." Antonio leaned down and kissed him for the first time. It was tentative, as if Antonio was still unsure of his welcome even with his body pressed against Lovino's. It sparked the lust inside Lovino. His body didn't want anything other than to be pressed as close as possible to Antonio, as soon as possible. So Lovino kissed him back, surged against him, made his need obvious.

Antonio made a startled sound but gave back as good as he got, licking at and then inside his mouth. The hand that had been on his face drifted to his hair and Lovino groaned into his mouth. He really liked having his hair pulled during sex. He took the opportunity to *finally* palm Antonio's ass and squeezed a little. It was firm but gave at the pressure and more than filled his hand. In other words, *still* the most perfect ass Lovino had ever encountered.

Lovino was starting to become short of breath and turned his head from the kiss, panting. Antonio just started kissing down his neck as he asked, "What do you want, Lovi?"

"I want you to fuck me." He moved his hands to the front of Antonio's shirt to get to work on the buttons as the junior sucked marks into his neck and bit at his earlobe.

"How?" Antonio's fingers found the button fly of his jeans and unfastened them. The action eased the pressure on his erection, but then there was a hand rubbing his dick over the cloth of his briefs. Lovino arched into the touch, small sounds of want escaping his throat. His hands became clumsy from pleasure, but he managed to get Antonio's shirt unbuttoned and tried to push it down his shoulders.

Antonio took his hands off of him long enough to let the shirt slip off but kissed his mouth again, taking away his ability to answer him. Lovino toed off his shoes and let the jeans drop to the floor as they fed at each other's mouths, the need in him growing with every caress of the other boy's tongue against his until he was shaking with it. They worked on the buttons of Lovino's shirt, getting it off of him in record time. Lovino then pushed Antonio away, further into the room so they could get on his bed. Antonio let him go easily and the second he stopped touching him, Lovino threw off his undershirt and socks, leaving them in the makeshift pile by the door. Antonio just stared at him for a long moment and Lovino guessed it made sense to leave all his clothes in one place. He pushed down his underwear, hissing at the loss of pressure on his increasingly insistent erection, and kicked them to the side.

Antonio's eyes roamed over him freely, but he still made no move to join him in nudity. In fact, he was still mostly dressed and that was enough to have Lovino questioning himself again. He *really* should have kept the briefs on. He blushed and asked, "I-is something wrong?"

"You're gorgeous. *Madre de Dios*, look at you. *Beautiful*." Lovino blushed for a different reason then.

"You maybe want to get naked so we can fuck?" He grumbled, because the bravado was fading with the disparity between them. It was reminding him of other things, like the fact that Antonio was his—

Antonio took off his shirt in an easy fluidity and however that thought ended was no longer Lovino's concern. "Apologies, *mi cariño*. I forgot myself at the sight of you." Lovino's flush flared again. *How can you just say things like that?* "And you never answered me, Lovi. How do you want me to make love to you, *hermoso*?" He kicked off his shoes and took off his socks.

"I want to ride you." Lovino said, stepping to him and kissing him. Antonio wasn't moving fast enough for him, so he undid his pants and pushed them down...only to be met with skin. He was going commando and Lovino couldn't help but wonder if he did that often. "Do you have—"

"Yeah. Get in bed, Lovi." Lovino resented being told what to do, but Antonio kissed his forehead at the request, so he didn't protest. He *did* look his fill of Antonio as he walked towards a bedside table, the uninterrupted expanse of skin mesmerizing and this decision might be a mistake, but for the view alone it may be worth it.

Lovino walked over to the surprisingly made bed and pulled back the covers. As he climbed in, he took in the rest of Antonio's room, all of it surprisingly together. The bed was a queen and unadorned but for the grey comforter and ocean blue sheets. The room itself was shockingly free of mess and clutter, only a few personal pictures on the desk and a movie poster on the wall. There was a small bedside table, dresser, and a desk, all in a matching dark wood, and a cheap but functional rolling chair at the desk. On top of the dresser, facing the bed, was a mirror and Lovino watched himself raised his eyebrows at it. Interesting.

Antonio fished out a couple of condoms, a latex glove, and a half empty bottle of lube from the drawer. He stood at the edge of the bed and was back to staring at Lovino who was sitting with his legs crossed as he leaned back on his hands. When he didn't immediately join him, Lovino looked him over, bit his lip, and queried, "Antonio?"

"Sorry." A blush colored his face now and it was a nice reversal as far as Lovino was concerned. He went to Antonio and took the condoms out of his hand.

"I guess you can look all you want, but I can be doing something at least." He opened one and rolled it on, Antonio doing the same now that his brain seemed to be functioning. It was certainly flattering that he could distract one of the most attractive guys Lovino had ever seen, but he did want them to have sex as some point in the very near future.

"You can't blame me for being distracted, not with how you look, Lovi." Antonio kissed him then, pushing him back against the mattress and *finally* pressing their bodies together. Lovino moaned at the feeling alone, one hand securely carded through Antonio's soft chocolate hair. The other roamed over him, mapping out all the valleys and hard ridges of Antonio's body and committing the resulting picture to memory. He wanted to do more exploring but with his mouth.

Antonio was settled between Lovino's now spread thighs, so Lovino pushed at his shoulder until they rolled over and he was on top, straddling him. He kissed now swollen lips once more before beginning to work down his body. Antonio kneaded his ass as he sucked and bit a mark to a sensitive spot along his jugular. As he went lower, tongue and lips and teeth learning him, Antonio's hands claimed and conquered whatever part of him they could reach most easily, his mouth releasing sounds of appreciation and words every so often.

Eventually, Lovino acted out the thought he had earlier, nipping at Antonio's hip before running his tongue down the indentation in his body, and ending in finally taking his cock in his mouth. Antonio's neck arched, fingers coming to grasp at Lovino's hair. It had been a while since he had given a blow job and the taste of the condom was just as unpleasant as he remembered, but it was worth relaxing his throat and taking as much of Antonio in his mouth as he could. He watched Antonio writhe, body a mess of Lovino's own making, as he sucked him down, tongue experimenting to see what his team captain liked. When he reflexively pulled at his hair and Lovino moaned around him, near frantic green eyes met his.

Lovino didn't try to hide one ounce of how he enjoyed destroying Antonio, stripping away his control like this. The boy had so much power of him, usually, that seeing him like this, bare before him in more ways than one and with his favorite body part in his mouth, was fucking *amazing*. Lovino bobbed, mouth making obscene slurping noises as he went, moaning deliberately just to fuck with him, and he saw something in Antonio's eyes snap. He damn near snarled, "*Enough*."

Lovino pulled off slowly, watching the need build in Antonio's face as he did it. When he finally released him with a *pop*, Lovino smirked at him, bringing a hand up to wipe at his bottom lip with his thumb. "It's been a while; I forgot how much I enjoy that."

Antonio sat up and kissed him, aggressive now. Lovino kissed back with a groan, loving how *wanted* he felt from the action. Antonio pulled them together only to flip them and bodily press Lovino into the mattress. His hands trailed down Lovino's hips and thigh, spreading his legs as far as possible before he ended the kiss abruptly to sit up and look him over.

Like this, Lovino was totally exposed to him. It was hard to bear as Antonio did nothing but take him apart with his eyes for some time. He didn't say anything since he had told Antonio to look as much as he wanted, but he couldn't help squirming, couldn't stop himself from throwing an arm over his eyes. A second after he did so, there was a gentle touch at his arm, Antonio moving above him. Lovino stopped blocking his own vision and met Antonio's gentle eyes with his own. "I don't want you to hide from me, *mi cariño*. No matter your goal, I refuse to rush through the pleasure of being with you. You are beautiful, Lovino; let me appreciate you."

...Lovino may have miscalculated how this would go. He nodded, wide eyed, and Antonio grinned down at him. It wasn't mocking or expectant. The expression wasn't anything but... happy, genuinely cheerful. Huh. Antonio reached for the glove and lube, saying, "Let's get you ready."

As he put on the glove, Lovino managed, "It's—it's been a long time since I was with a man like this."

Antonio looked at him sharply, surprised, but nodded. "I'll be careful." When his fingers were coated in a generous amount of fluid, he put his hand between his legs and leaned over to kiss his mouth. As they kissed, slow and deep, Antonio began preparing him. The first intrusion left him gasping into the kiss, then soon pushing back on it, silently asking for more. When the second finger pressed into him, the stretch burning in the best possible way, Lovino arched his neck and squeezed his eyes shut. Antonio began to suck small marks into his body, traveling south in the same way as Lovino, but there was nothing rushed or urgent about his actions. Small, desperate sounds of need were kept up in a steady stream now, on almost every inhale.

When Antonio licked at his sensitive nipple at the same moment he brushed his prostate, Lovino's back arched into the touch, moan torn from him as his hips jerked. Antonio muttered something in Spanish before sucking over the same spot, fingers unerringly finding his prostate again. Lovino clutched at him, crying out, "Tonio, *please!*"

Antonio paused, saying against his skin, "What do you need, *mi tesoro?*"

"I don't want to come like this," Lovino whimpered quietly, looking down his body to find himself unsurprisingly already being watched.

Antonio hummed in acknowledgement and started moving his hand again, a third finger joining in. Lovino clinched his jaw at the slight, but quickly fading pain. Antonio ran his free hand soothingly down his side, gaze attentive as he resumed his discovery of Lovino's body. It wasn't long until Lovino was moving his hips in time with Antonio's rhythm and finding that he needed more.

"I'm ready," He panted after several moments. Antonio took him at his word, kissing the spot just below his belly button and pulling his fingers from him. Lovino whined at the sudden feeling of emptiness. Antonio only patted his hip lightly in comfort as he spread the excess lube over his dick and moved to the side of the bed to dispose of the glove in what had to be a small trash bin. Lovino rolled to his side and came to kneel on the bed, waiting for Antonio to sit against the wall to crawl over to him.

Antonio was slightly slouched, legs stretched in front of him when Lovino straddled him, hands coming to rest on his shoulders. They kissed as Antonio guided his cockhead to Lovino's entrance. Lovino bore down on him at the first touch, jaw slackening and brow furrowing as the first ring of muscle was breached. As he took more of him in, Antonio said, "Look at me, Lovino."

He opened his eyes, watching the pleasure, wonder, and strain of control all fly across Antonio's face. It felt good, *so good*, and Lovino knew his immense enjoyment was written in

his expression. When he'd chosen to ride him, Lovino didn't expect it to be as intimate as it was. As Antonio sank deeper and deeper into him, they stared at each other from a short distance away, sharing each other's gasping breaths.

When they were as close as possible, Lovino kissed him because he needed to adjust to Antonio inside him like this and it was a shame not to when his lips were so close. The moment was perfect, everything good about their joining that he had imagined would bring.

After a long moment, Lovino pulled back, dazed, and blinked at him. "I'm going to move."

Antonio nodded.

Lovino began to roll his hips and the perfect moment got better.

If someone had asked Antonio 24 hours ago if he thought he would be waking up beside Lovino Vargas anytime in the near future, he would have laughed and asked what the hell they were smoking because that was some good shit.

Now, as he blinked awake in the early hours of Saturday morning with last night's memories in his head and the slumbering freshman against him, he could barely believe this was happening. Lovino, the adorable, intriguing new recruit to his team, was also the beautiful, *sexy* lover that could make him forget not only his name but his entire sense of self.

As a rule, Antonio tried to be generous in bed, but he'd never been so focused on the other person's pleasure to the point that he forgot his own needs. Secondary, sure, but *completely off his radar*? That had never happened until last night, when Lovino had looked at him utterly helpless in a way he would never have expected and whispered, "Please, Tonio, I need..."

The night had already been one of his most intense sexual experiences before that. After... well, Antonio wasn't quite sure what to make of it in the light of day.

Further uncertainty surrounded how Lovino would react when he woke up. He had been *avoiding him* at the party before Sadiq showed up, something that was never explained fully but Antonio could guess. For all that they were the same age, Lovino *was* a new member of the team he was leading and kind of his peer mentee, though there was no official term for that in their department. It was one thing to lust after him, another to fuck him, and something else entirely to share what they did last night.

What happens now? What did he want to happen now?

Well, he wanted to sleep with him again. In fact, he would like to sleep with him regularly. He also wanted to know how Lovino ticked, what made him abrasive and off-putting to most regularly but somehow able to make Antonio lose his mind in bed. He wanted to see Lovino smile more, preferably at him, the way he did after they both had come. The smile had been completely without reservation, giving the boy deep dimples and making his eyes almost sparkle with simple happiness.

Antonio didn't know what all that added up to, but he was eager to figure it out.

Everything depended on what Lovino wanted, too.

He rubbed gentle circles into Lovino's bare back, trying to wake him slowly. After about a minute, Lovino shifted and groaned, snuggling into his side. "Let me sleep," he slurred, not quite awake.

"Lovi." At the sound of his name, Lovino tensed, body instantly alert. Antonio felt the flutter of his eyelashes against his chest as Lovino opened his eyes then slowly lifted his head.

"Oh, fuck." Lovino's eyes were wide and...horrified? "That wasn't a dream."

Antonio smiled at him, hands still petting his back. "Do you dream about us having sex often?"

Lovino turned red and his expression crumpled into something like despair before a shield seemed to snap over his eyes and anger appeared. Antonio cursed himself because he'd known that Lovino doesn't like teasing. "I should go." Lovino rolled away from him and to the edge of the bed with surprising speed, Antonio releasing him because the last thing he wanted to do was make him feel trapped. But he needed to act fast to stop him from leaving like this.

"Lovi, wait. I didn't mean to tease you; I genuinely wanted to know. Did you want to sleep with me before last night?" Lovino paused, poised to stand but remaining sitting at the question. His back was to him, but Antonio could see something close to anguish in his expression in his mirror.

"So what if I did? It doesn't matter." Antonio scooted towards him, testing his welcome with a soft kiss to his shoulder.

"Yes, it does to me." He wanted to know if Lovino was just looking for anyone to bed last night or if he specifically wanted Antonio. He thought it was the latter, but he needed to be sure.

Lovino didn't relax at his touch, but he didn't move away either. Antonio continued to press kisses along his shoulder and slowly up his neck as he came closer to him. "Yes," Lovino whispered, the word having a weight to it. "I-I did."

Antonio hummed in acknowledgement, one hand daring now to draw light patterns on his side. "If you want to leave, I will not hold you, *hermoso*. But I would like it if you stayed a while."

Lovino turned his head towards him, his hesitance clear on his face. "You would?"

"Yes." Antonio kissed him gently. "If you are tired, we could go back to sleep. I think it's still pretty early. It's up to you."

The tension drained out of Lovino as he leaned back against Antonio. "I want to stay." He turned his head and pressed a kiss to Antonio's jaw. "You woke me up too early."

Antonio grinned. "Then come back to bed. Are you sore from last night?" The pain on Lovino's face had been real, after all. He had hurt Lovino, he just wasn't sure how yet.

"A little, but in a good way." So emotional pain, then. Antonio pulled them back towards the center of the bed, getting comfortable with Lovino tentatively settling himself against him. Antonio wrapped his arms around him and pressed a kiss into his hair, satisfaction curling through him as Lovino truly let himself relax. He liked this. He liked this a lot.

"Sleep, *mi cariño*."

Lovino huffed a laughed against his chest. "Don't tell me what to do," he murmured...before falling asleep.

Antonio grinned, shook his head, and followed him.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said hockey this chapter, but then the party got out of control. I originally wasn't even going to include it but, well, I did. Generally, if your decision-making process ends with fuck it, you might need a second opinion.

This was the chapter that kept me from writing this story for months, so next chapter should be out soon-ish.

Also, drink responsibly!

Chapter title is from FKA Twigs "Papi Pacify."

Chapter 5: Such an Almighty Sound

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was still relatively early on a Saturday morning. As such, the recreation center was probably as deserted as it ever got during operational hours. Matthew swiped his school ID to get through the turnstile and turned a friendly smile on the cranky looking student employee behind the welcome desk. "Hi. Would you mind telling me if someone is using the room with the heavy bags right now?"

She squinted at him, sighed, then clicked around for a second on her computer. She had bags under her eyes, a very large cup of coffee next to her hand, and Matthew wondered what time her shift had started. If she had been up as long as him, he understood her mood. "It's free, for another half hour."

"Great, I'll be out before then. Thank you!"

He moved towards the stairs and wound his way past cardio machines, the weight room, and a spinning class, body craving being able to *hit* something over and over again until he was exhausted. Why, you ask?

Matthew was just...a little frustrated. Maybe embarrassed. Angry? Nah.

He was *pissed*.

He knew he really should calm down and that he was getting worked up over what in the grand scheme of things amounted to nothing but...

He was fucking *sick* of being ignored by his own teammates.

Matthew sighed in relief that there was no one else in a large, open room that was probably used for kickboxing or yoga classes, the floors padded and large mirror taking up one side of the space. Along the wall farthest from the door there was a line of four heavy bags hanging from the ceiling, spread out enough to give people room to really go at them. He set his bag down and began to get ready, wrapping his hands in a manner that was rote after all these years and warming up his body, mind in a whirl of tangled rage and despair.

Matthew took off his hoodie, leaving him in running shorts and a tank top. His hair was tied back and he still had his contacts in from practice, so he had complete freedom of movement. He put in some wireless, noise-cancelling sport headphones (a much appreciated Christmas gift from his parents), started his music, and got to work. He started punching, each impact satisfying in a way that was both addicting and soothing, the thrumming cords of the rock song encouraging him, and allowed himself to think.

Most of his teammates were a couple years older than him and much larger. As far as they were concerned, particularly the starters, Matthew was an oddball choice for a fresh recruit.

He was seen as too slight to go head-to-head with much of their league, but wasn't trained enough to be a goalie. They looked at him and saw a last-resort fill-in, the out-of-place newbie who *might* be useful...in a couple of years. On the ice was the one place Matthew had always been accepted, been valued as an individual, been *seen*. That the people he was supposed to form a small family with continued to dismiss him was a little emotionally eviscerating.

He switched to kicks, knowing his skin would be bruised after but not caring. He took his time, letting his muscles remember what each type of kick felt like.

What made it worse was that they were kind of right. Matthew didn't bide his time a couple of years to finish growing up like many of his teammates did. He point blank could not have afforded to. While his family was in no means poor since they could afford to have him and his brother grow up in a sport that took a special kind of training, they didn't have a lot of leftover cash either. He needed the academic and athletic sides of his scholarship to be able to attend a school good enough to give him a decent shot at a top-tier law school and he wasn't ashamed of that reality. All of this meant that he *was* smaller than many he would play with and against, a point only driven home by the fact that everyone he meets can't believe he's here for hockey.

There were ways to compensate, of course. His mother was a petite woman, but she was the one who taught him how to throw a punch. From an early age, she had drilled into her children that size actually did matter in a fight and that the only way to win when things were so unequal was to be the most ruthless bastard around. *In the real world*, she would say, *there aren't rules of fairness. You either win or you lose. In a fight, that might mean the difference between death and survival. So strategically seize every advantage, watch your back, and always cheat.* Matthew knew how to use size against a hockey player, knew how to use their training against them, and he knew how to take a hit if necessary. He was good at what he did and knew it. It was why he was recruited in the first place.

Matthew moved into combos, the music blaring from his headphones driving him as much as this necessary release of emotion and control.

The problem was getting his teammates to believe it without him seriously injuring them before the season started. Nate was usually the right wing to his left in practice and seemed to actually like him. They played well enough together. The real problems stemmed from two upperclassmen: Ivan Braginski and Matthias Denson.

Ivan was a senior defenseman and fucking huge. His talent seemed to be creating an unmovable wall of defense; if a player was moving forward, he was just there, appearing almost out of thin air. He was obviously the one other players looked to for leadership outside of Berwald and he *still* refused to acknowledge Matthew's existence.

Matthias, on the other hand, openly mocked him. The sharp-eyed junior was their star centre with his quick movements and almost preternatural aim. When Matthew hadn't responded on the third day of classes to Matthias' first query as to Matthew's place with the rest of the team, he had escalated over the past few days until today when he deliberately ran into Matthew off the ice and made a laughing comment about his (lack of) weight. Considering they were in a hallway full of his team and that only Nate, Tino, and maybe Berwald seemed like they didn't

find that funny, it really fucking hurt. It wasn't that Matthew had problems with his weight; he just could never gain the muscle mass that many players had and knew better than to try. But the fact that it took a stern word and look from Berwald to get him to stop was insulting. They were a solid *two weeks* into practice and only had three weeks until their first game kicked off a long season. He wasn't gelling with the rest of the team and that was a problem.

Matthew was panting, his muscles burning with use as sweat dripped from him. He blinked the moisture out of his eyes, changed his movements to ease the pain just a little, and kept going.

The real kicker here was that Matthew was singled out for this treatment. If all freshmen on the team were similarly hassled and ignored, he would have brushed it off as some form of hazing and accepted it as a temporary price they all had to pay. But it was literally just him and he was nearly at the end of his rope. Either things had to change, or he would be pushed to the point of proving what he could do through force on the ice.

Matthew held back in practice because, with the size disparities, a lot of what he would have to do to remain effective involved a relatively high chance of minor injury. Legal, sure, but just dirty enough to even the odds. It took a lot for Matthew to get angry enough to act on it, but once he had reached that point, he was as mean as a snake. He knew that injuring his teammates was an all-around bad thing and would probably only alienate him further, but if this went on for much longer, he wouldn't care. He had tried being respectful, friendly, and open. He was competent enough that their coach wasn't yelling at him during practice. It was enough for Nate, Tino, and Berwald. For everyone else, particularly Ivan and Matthias... maybe force was the only way to change their minds.

For now, however, he was hoping to avoid that outcome. He had needed an outlet for his frustration and anger, so he had gone to his dorm room to drop off his hockey gear. Then he'd picked up a small backpack with the supplies he needed and headed to the school's gym. His mood had been marginally improved by Lovino's obviously untouched bed, recalling with a slight smile Feliciano's celebratory text that had come through late last night about Lovino leaving the party with Antonio. He hoped his friend was having a better morning than he was.

Matthew threw one last punch, putting every last bit of anger and a great deal of his flagging strength into it. The bag swayed and Matthew leaned against it slightly, exhaustion tugging at him as he let loose a small huffed laugh between his gasping breaths. *Damn*, but he'd needed that.

"-threw!" There was movement out of the corner of his eye in the room length mirror and Matthew whipped around to see none other Gilbert Beilschmidt.

Oh, God.

Wide-eyed, Matthew took out his earbuds and said, sounding just as startled as he was, "Gilbert! Hi." *Hi?! I say hi of all things?*

Gilbert, bemused, said, "Hello, Matthew." He was dressed in low sitting workout pants and a black tank top, which was expected attire in the gym, and had a small, pull-closed bag slung over one shoulder. The papers and pens in his hands were not. He walked further into the

room with a smirk on his face now. "I've been trying to get your attention. I didn't want to walk up on you while you were clearly working through something."

...Matthew was a good person. He didn't deserve to have the most attractive guy he'd ever seen find him in this state. He was sweaty, out of breath, and badly needed a shower. Matthew was a fucking mess. Meanwhile, Gilbert walked around in a shirt that looked like it was painted on him, not a hair out of place, looking for all the world like an artist's masterpiece come to life. He didn't *deserve* this.

Matthew was beautiful.

It wasn't a novel observation for Gilbert to make by now, certainly wasn't a surprise. But it was all Gilbert could do not to stare at him as he walked further into the room. Matthew was flushed from exertion, lips red from increased blood flow, eyes bright in the way that spoke of satisfaction. Sweat had his clothes clinging to him and the skin that was visible glistening in the harsh light. Very little of the body he usually kept covered under those too big jeans and sweatshirt was left to Gilbert's imagination now and he had to forcibly remind himself that Matthew was Ludwig's friend. He was his *baby brother's* friend that he most definitely should not seduce. But Matthew was still catching his breath, chest heaving with it, and Gilbert's mind told him quite logically that this was close to what he would probably look like after sex.

That thought led to others, just as unhelpful and entirely to do with the passion he displayed as he stuck the bag over and over again, eyes unwavering from his target. God and the way he'd *moved*, flowing between one strike and the next, clearly far into his workout and exhausted but remaining unrelenting but for the few seconds he took to adjust his position. Gilbert had maybe been in the room for two, three minutes before Matthew had stopped but he could tell he was trained and could fight...he should stick around.

"What are you doing here?" Matthew asked, face reddening and eyes looking away from him, genuinely shy.

Gilbert shrugged, setting his stuff down on the floor along the wall, about halfway into the room. "I have the room reserved in about five minutes. There's an MMA club meeting here in about twenty, but I like to get here early."

"Oh. I-I've been in here longer than I thought. I should go stretch or...something." His hands immediately removed the earbuds hanging around his neck, and he turned towards his stuff. Without his permission, Gilbert's eyes followed the lines of his back down his body, lingering unabashedly on his ass and thick thighs.

"You could stay." *Gil, no*, he told himself. "For the meeting, I mean. You obviously have some experience with martial arts."

"I shouldn't," Matthew said, turned away from him as he started unwrapping his hands. "I really need to cool down and eat something. I already had practice this morning and shouldn't workout any more today. I also really want to shower."

Do you need some help with—stop. "Cool down in here for a bit? I would appreciate the company." *Gilbert, what are you doing?*

Matthew froze and turned to look at him, an adorable confused furrow in his brow. "Really?"

"Really, really."

Matthew gave a bark of laughter and grinned at him. "Did you just quote *Shrek* at me?"

Oh, God, I actually did. "Did you just recognize the movie from me saying two words?"

"Touché. I guess I'll stay for a *few* more minutes, then." Gilbert smiled at him as he pulled his arm across his body in a simple stretch.

"What are you trained in, Matthew?" Gilbert asked, curious. He started a light warm-up with some moving stretches. Today's meeting was to introduce people to each other and the club, then they were going to split up into sparing partners based on skill level. He wasn't going to teach any today, though he was certified to do so, but more get people familiar with the basics.

Matthew shrugged as he continued cooling down. "Started with taekwondo as a kid, then jujitsu as a teenager. My mom insisted it was adequate cross-training and would teach us more useful life skills than almost any other extra-circular."

"Cross-training? For hockey, right? West told me you played..."

"Yeah. My brother and I grew up with it. How about you?" Matthew bent over, easily touching the floor with his legs straight, and Gilbert had to remind himself what to say.

"Started with karate but there was an MMA class taught right before mine. I fell in love with the movements and switched when I was about 11. Do you have a sparring partner already?"

Matthew lifted his head from his stretch. "Here? Oh, no. I'm completely out of practice."

Gilbert scoffed. "I wasn't here for long, but you don't look out of practice to me."

"Oh, yeah. Today was...I usually don't..." He paused for a long moment as he moved into a split leg stretch. He didn't push it, waiting to see if Matthew would finish the thought or not. After about 15 seconds he sighed and said quietly, "I guess I'm just tired of being dismissed and picked on."

Gilbert frowned. "Someone's bullying you? Already?" *What the fuck? Who would dare bully him? He's great? Who would look at him and think that was acceptable? Does West know? He wouldn't stand for this. Hell, I won't stand for this. He's my brother's only friend, I have to do something.*

Matthew winced. "Nothing like...no, yeah. I guess it is bullying, for at least one of them." *There's more than one!?* "But I'm handling it. I *will* handle it. I was just frustrated and needed an outlet."

Gilbert let that sink in, still outraged but recognizing that he wasn't in much of a position to do anything about it. He didn't know Matthew, not really, but he wanted to. After a moment he decided on saying, "Hey, if you want to get back into practice and want a sparring partner, just let me know. Or even someone to just hold the bag while you unleash yourself on it, I'm your guy, okay?"

Matthew straightened and blinked at him. "Thank you," he said, sounding far more affected than Gilbert thought he would be. He visibly swallowed and continued, "I actually might take you up on that."

Gilbert flashed him a smile and stopped moving. "Awesome. Let me give you my number."

Matthew startled but moved towards his pile of belongings anyway. "Okay, sure." He retrieved his phone and Gilbert walked over to him. "Here you go."

Gilbert quickly put in his information saying, "Text me if you need me. Or just, you know, want to talk. Or if you want someone to kick some ass for you."

Matthew huffed out a laugh. "I do my own ass kicking, Gilbert, but I appreciate the offer."

He offered the phone back. "Call me Gil."

Matthew smiled and looked up the small difference in their heights at him. "Then I'm Mattie." Matthew's hand brushed his as he took his phone, a zing of awareness shooting through Gilbert.

Since Matthew was Ludwig's friend, Gilbert wouldn't actively pursue him. But if he suggested that they get together, he sure as shit wouldn't say no.

The door pushed open and Matthew looked down and stepped away from him, blush on his cheeks. Gilbert watched him do it, wanting to know every way to make him blush and just what it took for him to stop being shy around someone. He turned from that thought and looked to see who had arrived, only to grin wide and shout in greeting, "Scottie!"

Alistair, dressed in their customary sweatpants and t-shirt for working out, shot him a dirty look then very pointedly looked at Matthew, saying, "I still don't understand why we had ta meet on a Saturday mornin', Gilly."

"It's late morning."

"It's 9:30!"

"Exactly!"

"I should..." Matthew trailed off, turning to get his stuff.

"Wait a second, Mattie. Do you know Alistair?"

Matthew looked back and smiled tentatively at his friend. "Ah, no. Good morning."

"If ye say so." Alistair rolled their eyes but came forward to shake Matthew's hand. "I'm Alistair, they/them."

Matthew blinked but maintained his welcoming smile. "Matthew or Mattie, he/him. It's nice to meet you."

They squinted at him. "Ye sound like ye actually mean tha'."

Matthew frowned at them, confused. "I do? I don't really know a lot of people but it *is* nice to meet you."

Alistair frowned back at him. "Huh. Wha' do ye know."

Gilbert sighed and pressed a hand over his eyes. "You didn't have your morning coffee, did you?"

"Feck off."

"I'll take that as a no." Gilbert smiled apologetically at Matthew. "Please forgive them. Alistair's my best friend, but a little abrasive before their first cup of coffee."

"Don't apologize fer me, Gilly." Alistair said, poking his side.

"It's fine, really. And, Alistair, there are worse addictions to have. I need to go."

"Yer leavin'?" They asked, scowling. Gilbert would *definitely* be doing the talking to the new members. Alistair was his second in command for the club, taking a joint vice-president and treasurer role, but they were not exactly welcoming to someone who didn't know them before 11:00 *and* before coffee. But he had work at noon and 9:30 was really the latest he could have the meeting and still be on time.

"Yeah. I'm *really* hungry and want to get dressed." The door opened and a couple people that Gilbert vaguely remembered from tabling yesterday walked in. Matthew grimaced and hurried to gather his stuff. He stood and said as he moved past them towards the door, "Have a good day!"

"See ye around, Mattie." Alistair actually lived on campus, their scholarship paying for on-campus housing, so that was a real possibility.

"Remember what I said, okay?" Gilbert called after him. Matthew shot him one last smile before all but fleeing through the door. Gilbert watched him go then looked back to his friend, finding them watching him. "What?"

"Ye don't care, ye said. Jus' wanna be a familiar face, ye said," Alistair said, tone dry.

Gilbert winced. "Maybe I care a little now. But he's West's friend and a freshman. That would be weird."

"Uh huh," they said, deadpan.

Gilbert rolled his eyes. "Come on. We have people to greet, a club to run."

"We're talkin' 'bout this later."

Dammit.

Antonio eventually made it downstairs after a...very full morning. He and Lovino had slept about an hour more before Lovino grumbled awake and tried to leave the room. Antonio had asked him if he was trying to sneak out, not bothering to hide the sadness he felt at the thought in his voice. Lovino had hesitated but ended up just using the restroom then returning to bed. Antonio did the same then managed to convince him (with very little coaxing needed) that round two was in order. He had been on top this time, lazily taking Lovino apart as they made love, having him rambling in Italian by the end, before carefully putting him back together in the aftermath. They had taken a shower together (to conserve water, he'd said), and now he had come downstairs, pleased to see that a cleaning crew had already been through the place. One of his housemates, Leonardo, came from *a lot* of money. He loved parties but hated having a dirty house afterwards, so he always paid a cleaning service to come through the day after.

In any case, some of his housemates were scattered on the first floor, Luciano and João in the living room, Leo with Miguel in the dinning/bar area, and Martín in the kitchen. He had already sent a text to the group chat for house residents about him having someone sleep over and to *not* make a big deal out of it so help him God, but hadn't said who it was. Lovino was only minutes behind him, throwing on last night's jeans and one of Antonio's t-shirts since his smelled like...well, a college party. That meant he had *very* little time to convince his housemates not to fuck this up for him.

Lovino hated teasing and had begrudgingly expressed his hesitance to come downstairs because he didn't think his teammates would let his presence pass without comment. Antonio hoped, very much so, to sleep with Lovino again and doubted that would happen if people gave him grief over it. They hadn't talked about what happened next, Antonio fearing that Lovino would dismiss them having a more formal thing out of hand and Lovino hadn't brought it up. But Antonio *had* made it very clear that he wanted Lovino to stay at least for a cup of coffee and breakfast before heading out, that he was happy to be with him. Now he had to make sure their teammates didn't act like this was strange.

He motioned everyone into the kitchen and they followed easily. Since everyone seemed eager to get the details they followed, João drawling dryly in Portuguese, "*I regret that your bedroom is next to mine, Tonio. And that I understand Spanish.*"

Antonio frowned at him and said in Spanish, "*It's not like we were loud.*"

"*Loud is relative when you were against the wall we share.*" João glared at him, but it had no real bite to it. He was gripping his coffee mug like it was a lifeline but Antonio didn't feel too bad about it.

"*Like you've never had loud sex against that wall.*"

He smirked at him, green eyes shining. *"That's why I didn't try to stop you. It's been a while since you were with someone; I didn't want to spoil the mood."*

"Wait a second," Luciano cut in, his native Portuguese rushing out of him. *"You knew who he was with and you didn't tell us?"*

"Yep. I wanted to watch him tell you." João leaned back against the counter, cup of coffee in hand, and sipped at it.

Antonio shook his head at them and said, *"Listen, I really like him but he doesn't do well with teasing. Be cool."*

Leo asked in Spanish, *"Are you making him breakfast?"*

"Yes."

Martín whistled, *"He did a number on you, buddy. Who is this guy?"*

"Um..." Everyone turned to see Lovino standing at the kitchen's entryway wearing one of Antonio's shirts, hair still wet from a shower, and barefoot. He looked perfect. He also looked super uncomfortable. "Morning, guys."

There was a collective beat of silence from everyone who didn't know, João casually answering with, "Good morning, Lovino."

Antonio beamed at him. "What do you want for breakfast, Lovi?"

Someone whispered in Spanish, *"Holy shit."*

Someone else, probably Martín, asked quietly, *"Who won the pool?"* Antonio turned narrowed eyes at him, not liking the sound of that at all.

"I did," João said smugly. *"Didn't want to ruin the mood, my ass."*

Lovino looked between all of them, face settling into scowl that Antonio now knew was a defensive mask. "...Is this going to be a problem?"

There was a quick chorus of negative responses, everyone dispersing, giving various excuses to leave the kitchen. Lovino tentatively stepped closer to Antonio to get out of everyone's way, like he was still unsure of the situation. Antonio reached out to grab his hand, only to have Lovino immediately flinch away from him.

That...stung.

Lovino seemed to realize what he had done, turning surprised eyes back to Antonio, and hurried to take his hand. He'd come closer to him while chasing the touch and their sides were nearly pressed together. Quietly, so that only Antonio could hear him, he said, "...I'm not used to being touched like that."

Oh. "I'm sorry, *mi cariño*. I didn't mean to startle you."

Lovino pouted a little, looking away. "Don't apologize, bastard," he said softly, even as he intertwined their fingers. "It was stupid."

"It's not stupid, Lovi," Antonio murmured. "Can I kiss you?"

"I mean, I guess." He said, leaning into him. Antonio kissed him gently, wanting to treat this action, this person, like it was the most precious, fragile thing in the world. Lovino had flinched at the smallest show of affection from a *lover* outside of the bedroom and if *that* wasn't telling, he didn't know what was. Lovino melted into the touch, the careful caress of lips, and Antonio savored the privilege for what it was.

Lovino pulled away and Antonio gave him room to breathe. Then he said, tone grumpy but small smile on his mouth, "I'm hungry."

Antonio grinned at him. "Then I guess I need to make you something."

"Coffee, first. Then...surprise me."

"I can do that, *hermoso*."

Lovino huffed but his eyes danced with secret pleasure. "Is that a thing, now? You calling me those words?"

Antonio left his side to get them mug. "Yes, I think it is. Now, how do you like your coffee?"

...Lovino was fucked. He was *so* fucked.

Why?

Because Antonio was fucking *wonderful*, that's why.

The boy was nowhere *close* to out of his system. In fact, Lovino wanted him more after last night and that morning, which he honestly saw coming but he had kind of banked on being wrong. After being on the soccer team for two weeks, he had slept with his team captain. After a week of classes, he had already bedded his student mentor. And he wanted to do it again.

Argh.

Lovino keyed his door open, unsurprised to find Matthew lounging on his bed, looking up with a knowing smile. "Well, hello."

"Sup." Lovino closed the door behind him and quickly got to stripping out of the clothes he had worn last night, having forgone underwear because, uh, no.

Matthew groaned, slapping a hand over his eyes. "Geez, Lovi. Warn a guy."

"I ain't got nothin' you haven't seen." He threw all his dirty clothes into his hamper, pulled on a pair of pajama pants, and plopped unceremoniously into his bed. Matthew peaked through

his fingers to check that Lovino was indeed wearing clothes, before putting his hands down and narrowing his eyes at him, specifically staring at his chest. Oh. Shit.

"That's not your shirt. It's too big for you."

"Uhhh..."

"Lovi, Feli texted me at 1:14 in the morning about you heading upstairs with Antonio. I mostly want to know if you enjoyed yourself." Matthew said patiently, turning to face him and resting his head on his hand.

Lovino covered his face with his hands and said, "Yes. A lot. More than I should. Best guy I've ever been with."

Matthew smiled. "I'm happy for you, Lovi." And Lovino knew he truly was. "Are you going to see him again?"

"Yeah. Monday. At practice. Because he's my *team captain* and I'm an *idiot*."

Matthew frowned at him. "I meant romantically but did he mistreat you this morning? Act like it was a problem?"

"...No. He was..." Perfect. Amazing. Dreamy. "...great. He made me breakfast." It was damn good, too. The boy made a mean omelet. "He can cook."

"That's a good thing."

"Yeah..."

"Lovi? Are you okay?" Matthew sat up, legs dangling over the side of his mattress and concern clear on his face, and Lovino stared at the ceiling.

"I want to see him again," he admitted quietly. "I want...him. The way he...did everything. I felt like I mattered."

"Of course you matter, but it's great he made you feel that way. Does he want to see you again, too?"

"I want to say yes but honestly? I don't know. He made sure I knew he wanted me to stay with him, but it made it so apparent that it kind of felt like he knew this was going to be the only time we were together and he wanted to make it last?"

"You guys didn't, I don't know, maybe talk about what happens now?" Matthew asked, voice betraying some of his disbelief.

"No. I mean, if he wanted to see me again, even if just for sex, he would have told me, right?"

"Well, did you tell him you wanted to see him again?"

"...No. But I wore his shirt home. I held his hand in front of his housemates who are also my teammates. I *stayed the night* and through the morning. Those are flashing neon signs that I want to see him again." Lovino looked at Matthew only to find his friend wearing an unreadable expression.

"Let me test my understanding. You had a night, and probably morning, of great sex. He left some pretty obvious marks on your neck." Lovino's hand flew up to cover the area, blushing madly. "He made it clear that he wanted you to stay the night. He gave you his shirt to wear while he made breakfast for you in a house full of your mutual teammates. That probably means that your whole team now knows about you two."

Lovino paled. "Oh, God, I hadn't thought of—"

"Focus, Lovi. You just walked through the door and it's two! In the afternoon! Did he call you anything special? Something other than your name in front of other people?"

Mortified, Lovino said, "He said some stuff in Spanish that I didn't understand. Kind of said it like an endearment?"

"...No offense, but if what you did was a flashing neon sign, he made a billboard in Times Square. He wants to see you again."

Lovino sighed, seeing the sense of Matthew's words but..."In what way, though? He needs to tell me but I don't want to be that guy that after one night goes and demands some sort of commitment. And, fuck, Mattie. That bastard and his friends are like some kind of party royalty on campus. They even have special titles after the Horsemen of the fucking Apocalypse. He's going to want to take advantage of that. You should have seen the way people were eyeing the four of them at the party—"

"Oh." Lovino stopped, realizing what he'd said and what that meant for Matthew's crush on Gilbert.

"They weren't looking back! They mostly kept to themselves. Your guy didn't—"

"He's not my anything. And this isn't about me, right now. Nothing you said has convinced me that Antonio won't want to see you again. Out of everyone at the party, he chose you. He actively worked to spend more time with you. He will probably continue to do so."

"...We'll see." Lovino sighed and looked Matthew, really looked at him. "Thanks, Mattie. But what the fuck happened to your shins?"

"Um...I went to the gym after practice today and got into it with a heavy bag."

"Holy shit, *why* did you go work out after *practice*?"

"I needed to work through some stuff. You know my team isn't exactly welcoming." Matthew shrugged and looked away from him.

Lovino frowned at him. "Has it gotten worse, Mattie? They're not like hurting you are they?"

"Yes and no. I'll handle it on Monday so don't worry about it."

"...Okay. But if you need me to fuck up a bitch for you, I'm there."

Matthew laughed lightly. "You're the second person to tell me that today. But like I told Gil, I do my own—"

"*Skrrt*, hold up. Gil?" Matthew's face reddened and Lovino bolted upright, smile on his face. "No! Really?"

"...I might have talked to him today. For a while. He was very nice and gave me his number in case I needed—"

"He *gave you* his *number*! Did you text him already?" Lovino was excited this was happening. While he was genuinely happy for his friend, he desperately needed something to take his mind off of the big question mark in his mind about Antonio.

"Yeah, just to give him my number but he said it was for if I needed a sparring partner or something."

"...Or something. And a *sparring partner*? Doesn't that involved getting sweaty and rolling around on the floor while pressed against each other?"

"...Sometimes. That's grappling but listen, it wasn't like that. It was totally innocent in context. And I was a complete train wreck when he saw me, so I doubt he would even be thinking of me as anything besides his little brother's friend. And he's the MMA club president so he probably knows a bunch of people who need sparring partners."

"Sure. Or he wants to roll around and get sweaty with you on the floor."

Matthew groaned, falling to the side dramatically to bury his face in his pillow and Lovino laughed, feeling worlds better than he did when he walked in the room. There would be time for everything else, specifically on Monday and that was hours away. For now, he had a shit ton of homework to plow through, and he needed to convince his friend that the first person he'd ever truly been attracted to was completely down to fuck him.

Chapter End Notes

Look at these DORKS.

I love them.

Edit 8/12/17: realized that the almost captain and one of the current housemates had the same name. They are definitely different people, but I changed the housemate's name to Leo to avoid confusion!

Chapter title is from Florence and the Machine's "Drumming Song."

Hide Underneath My Pride

Chapter Notes

So yeah. Light angst here. Some backstory. *words* describes an emoji.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You're still here, twink? God, why the *hell* did Coach let something so *breakable* on the team?"

"I don't know, man. No clue how he even—"

Matthew slammed his locker shut, half dressed as he prepared for practice Monday morning. It was too fucking early for this shit and he was beyond done with Matthias. He told Lovino and Gilbert that he would handle it and that was exactly what he intended to do.

He turned to where Matthias and one of his friends were standing, shirtless but comfortable in his body in this space. Part of him wanted to rattle off just how much he lifted on weight training days. Another (thankfully very small) part of him wanted to punch him in the throat and watch the other boy struggle to breathe around a collapsed trachea. Perhaps that thought was apparent in his eyes since Matthias' friend flinched when Matthew looked at them.

But no, he wouldn't do either since neither would help. The former would make him look insecure and the latter would probably get him kicked off the team. Instead, he opted for what he decided on the night before, what he thought was the most mature response. If this gambit didn't work, then he was going to be left with raw violence or talking to the coach about it.

"Matthias, what exactly is your problem with me?" Matthew asked, the picture of innocence. He crossed his arms, furrowed his brow, and tilted his head to the side, just a little, just enough to look helpless and vulnerable. "Am I just the unlucky freshman to be picked out for teasing this year or do you have a problem with me as a person?"

Matthias looked down his nose at him, sneering at what he perceived to be weakness and taking Matthew's bait. Matthew distantly noticed that he was strikingly handsome in his arrogance but pushed the detail away. "You."

Matthew feigned hurt. "What have I done to you?"

"It's what you've done to the *team*, you idiot. You're a *baby* compared to us and you expect that to just pass by without comment? We could have had an actual adult join in your place, someone who was useful instead of baggage."

Now that *did* hurt, but it also enraged him, sparked some primal instinct for violence. But no. He had a plan. He would not knock out this fucker's teeth on a whim. "If that's what you

think, then you should have no problem beating me."

That visibly startled him. "What you talking about, twink?"

Matthew raised his eyebrows at him. "First, my name is Matthew. Second, you *do* know what that word means, right? Because you're using it wrong and I'm starting to get mixed messages on if you actually hate me. Third, I am challenging you to a one-on-one game." *It's either that or I beat your ass.*

Matthias sputtered a bit as he processed everything Matthew said before spitting out with an incredulous laugh, "As if! You think you could actually beat me?"

Matthew shrugged and lied through his teeth. "I don't know." If he couldn't beat him, he wouldn't have issued the challenge. He turned towards his locker and resumed the process of getting ready. He sighed before continuing, sounding young and sad. "It's about showing you and the team that I belong here. I probably won't win, but I'm out of ideas to get you all to respect me and I'm running out of time. Our first game is less than three weeks out, after all." Let him think that he was desperate, that he was resigned to lose before they even began. He knew how easily sound carried in the locker room, knew that the majority of the team had heard every word he said.

"...Fine." Matthias said and Matthew felt his stare. "Let's make this quick since we don't have time to waste. I'll let Coach know."

Matthew lowered his head so that his still unbound hair would hide his smile. "Thank you," he said softly before he started pulling on his pads. The locker room was quiet, but it usually was this early so Matthew paid it no mind.

When Matthew walked out of the locker room, Nate was waiting for him. His partner walked with him, saying lowly so no one overheard, "You sure about this?"

Matthew answered him, voice barely above a whisper, "Yes. I really am out of options. It's either this or I send his ass to the hospital in traction."

Nate coughed but when Matthew looked over, he saw laughing hazel eyes. "Could you really do that?"

"Yes. One day I'll tell you about the last time I lost control and fought someone out of rage. It might get the others to stop, but I doubt Coach Morgendorffer would appreciate it." Matthew smiled up at him, wide and innocent and Nate actually laughed. The memory of what he had almost done still twanged with guilt and shame, but there was little space for it in his head at the moment.

"You're not wrong."

They approached their box to take off their blade guards and Matthew was addressed by the coach himself. There were a few people around, including Ivan, but Matthias was warming up on the ice. The man was older with black, receding hair and assessing brown eyes. He had

been a massive and intimidating player in his prime, but now he had a bit of a beer gut. He was still agile and strong, but you couldn't tell it by looking at him.

"Williams, what are you doing?" he asked, voice a deep, lazy thing.

Matthew shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "He's been giving me hell, sir. I thought I should give him some back is all."

The coach narrowed his eyes at that, intelligent enough to hear what Matthew wasn't saying, to understand what it meant for the most popular member of the team to "give hell" to a freshman. He sighed after a long moment and nodded at Matthias. "Try not to hurt him too badly. We *do* have a game coming up and I would like to have him start as planned, not in a cast."

Matthew could almost feel the surprise of his teammates. "I know, coach. Nothing that would be illegal in a regular game."

He snorted. "I've seen what you get away with by being 'legal,' Williams. Do *not* put our starting centre out of commission."

"Of course," Matthew said simply but felt a mischievous spark in his eye.

He glided onto the ice to warm up as his coach shook his head. He also heard the man say to those who had been listening in, "No one warn Denson. If he made him lose his patience, then he deserves to get the full brunt of him. What the hell was he thinking? I recruited that boy myself."

Matthew smirked. He hadn't bothered to tell anyone else that little detail. He had come to his high school to try and scoop up both him and Alfred, but seemed pleased even though he only had gotten Matthew.

Everyone seemed to take Morgendorffer's order seriously and, when Matthew glanced over before they started team warm-up drills, not a few were staring at him warily. He met Ivan's eyes before looking away quickly, startled by the unexpected attention.

When drills were done, Morgendorffer told everyone but Matthew and Matthias to get off the ice. He then laid out the rules. "Five minutes. Regular rules about contact. After a goal, scorer goes mid-ice until the other gets possession. Whoever has the most goals wins. Do *not* seriously injure each other."

Matthias snorted, clearly amused at the thought of weak, frail Matthew being able to injure him. Poor dumb bastard.

Morgendorffer gave his centre a pitying look before putting the puck between them and skating backwards out of the way. "On my mark."

They got in position and Matthew couldn't help asking him, "Have you played a lot of one-on-one games before?" Matthew had watched him practice, watched recordings of the teams previous games before deciding on joining the team. He would bet that he hadn't, based off of

how he played, how he seemed to be expecting another forward to pass him the puck to score. He played like he relied on other people. Matthew *could* but it wasn't how he'd learned.

"Enough to know that you're going to embarrass yourself."

Matthew smiled slowly towards the vulcanized rubber. It was not a nice smile. "I'll brace myself for the humiliation, then."

A whistle sounded and Matthew lost the face-off, but he had expected that, already gaining momentum as he skated backwards. Matthias seemed to think he had broken away, but Matthew was *very* fast and just this side of reckless. As he set up shot for Matthew's unprotected goal, Matthew was already coming around, intercepting the puck smoothly before it made it halfway to the goal. He zipped off, letting his trajectory sling him past a surprised Matthias.

Matthew doubted that the centre had a lot of practice playing defense. Matthew, however, grew up playing his brother, had trained just as much as a forward to understand how they would move. One-on-one games were his bread and butter for a good portion of his life and that came in handy now.

He was fast and agile, mind working to judge Matthias' location from the sound of blades. He slowed abruptly and turned, puck in his control as Matthias zoomed past him, right over where he would have been and damn near crashing into a wall. He had been trying to check him and that was just too damn bad. As he righted himself, Matthew eased the puck into the goal and proceeded to the middle of the ice.

Matthew looked at him expectantly while Matthias damn near had his jaw on the floor. When nothing happened for a count of three, Morgendorffer yelled, "The clock is still ticking, Denson!"

Matthew waited until he pushed the puck out of the goal before quickly retreating further into his territory rather than moving forward as Matthias probably expected. He was in his element defending and he knew his eyes were all but daring Matthias to score.

Matthias started skating towards the goal, gaining momentum, and Matthew did the same but towards him. What he was about to do was the definition of foolish but he was angry and wanted to knock Matthias down a peg. He would *never* do this in an actual game, but it was only possible because it was the last thing Matthias expected.

So he headed almost straight for him but at a slight angle, putting them on a collision course. Matthias smiled, knowing that, if Matthew bodily ran into him, not only would it be charging but Matthew was more likely to be hurt due to the weight disparity. He dared Matthew to run into him, not altering his own course to avoid him, but that wasn't Matthew's plan.

Timing it right, Matthew did one of the fancier stops, making sure the ice spray from his blades was high—high enough to hit Matthias in the eyes.

Matthias shouted from suddenly having ice on his face, flinching away and losing control of the puck for just a second. That second was all Matthew needed to steal it away and sprint to

the other side of the ice to score, his teammates howling at the maneuver.

Puck deposited in the net, Matthew turned and found a furious Matthias speeding towards him and looking like he was going to take a swing at him. Matthew didn't blame him; what he had just done was beyond disrespectful. Didn't mean he was going to let him land anything without serious consequences.

Morgendorffer shouted out, "Denson, *don't*—" but Matthias was already there. He swung at suddenly empty air as Matthew moved to the side to avoid his fist, damn near jumping to avoid his body. Matthew gave Matthias a little push to help his momentum along so that the star centre and darling of the team smacked into the glass face first.

Matthew couldn't help the smile on his face as he skated backwards until he was at the midway point. "How much time is left, Coach?" Matthew's voice held nothing but detached curiosity.

"...Minute fifteen."

"Come on, *Denson*." Matthew called, unable to keep the snarl out of his voice once he said the other's name. "Make me work for it."

What he had done up to that point was either a trick or could be counted on luck. He needed to show his teammates that he wasn't just good in his position but *born* for it.

"What *exactly* did he do to piss Williams off?" Morgendorffer asked his teammates.

Nate answered as Matthias gained possession of the puck and Matthew backed up just a little. "Well, he mocked him for his weight, said he was useless, had half of the team laughing at him, and called him a couple of names."

"...that was stupid."

"I think he's getting that," piped up Tino. "We tried to warn him off but he kept pushing him."

Matthew only had eyes for Matthias and the puck. Half of his face was red from the impact against the wall, but he hadn't broken his nose. He seemed serious now and Matthew found that he damn near hungered for the battle. It had been a while since he had done this with Alfred and he found he missed the challenge.

Matthias was good at what he did and Matthew knew that he probably couldn't hold him off for the full minute that was left on the clock, but that was fine. He just needed to make him realize who he was dealing with.

So Matthew shadowed and countered his moves. After several tense moments, Matthias made a clever play and Matthew prevented the goal, having recognized the movements from hours of just him and Alfred going back and forth like this. Matthew didn't bother trying to score another goal. He just redirected the puck to the wall, making it bounce off and glide to the other end of the ice. He was playing for time at this point and making Matthias skate across the ice to fetch the thing was all he needed. Matthew remained in front of his goal,

knowing that the only play left for Matthias to make with five seconds left from so far away was a slap shot.

He was right and Matthias' aim was true. Matthew blocked the shot with his hand since it originally had been heading for his face. The hit fucking hurt and he barely kept from slapping himself in the eye, but he got it.

Morgendorffer called time and Matthew straightened to the silence of his team. Puck still in hand, he skated to where Matthias stood, dumbfounded. He stopped inside of his personal space and hissed in his face, "Still think I'm useless?"

"How?" Matthias asked, quiet now and clearly astonished. "How did you do that? It was like you knew what I was going to do before I did."

Matthew stared at him and tried to keep being angry, to hold on to the resentment. But he wasn't that person. The teasing would probably stop and he had driven his point home. So he sighed out his anger and let his mouth twitch into a smile, an olive branch. "I cheated."

Matthew watched the confusion and anger flash over Matthias' face before he read the tease on Matthew's. He laughed a little and shook his head. "I owe you an apology."

"Yeah, you do. Am I going to get it?" Matthew wasn't going to sugar coat that.

Matthias' smile widened. "Yeah. I'm sorry for what I said to you. I'm so sorry that I'm going to let that little trick of yours slide."

Matthew grinned and someone called out, "So are you two going to kiss now or...?"

Matthew jerked away from Matthias, blushing and cursing himself for it.

Matthias rolled his eyes and made a rude gesture towards the entire team as they skated to join them at the box and get the plan for the day from their coach. He said as they moved, "You never answered my question. How did you do that?"

Matthew shrugged. "I may have downplayed how much practice I have with one-on-one games. My opponent was the most aggressive, devious centre I've ever seen. You did what he would do but without knowing that I would adapt to stop you at every point."

Matthias blinked at him and asked as they pulled up, "Who did you play against?"

"My twin. We'll play him about mid-season and you'll see what I mean. I was the only one in our league through high school who could consistently stop him, but we played on the same team."

Matthias winced, probably imagining what it would be like to have them both on one team. "Shit."

"Talking about your brother, Williams?" Morgendorffer asked taking in the tail end of their conversation.

"Yes, sir. He asked how I was trained."

His coach snorted out a laugh before addressing the team. "Gentlemen, I'm sure I don't have to lecture you on bullying. One thing I *do* want to highlight from this incident was how Williams played that last round. You have to adapt and anticipate..."

Practice proceeded normally after that and Matthew was pleased to note that his teamed seemed to accept him now, a few sheepishly apologizing afterwards. As they walked out of the building to greet the early morning light, Nate sidled up to him and asked quietly, "What happened the last time you got so angry you lost control?"

Matthew looked around to see if anyone else was listening. There were a couple of people close by, but they seemed engrossed in their own conversations. He met Nate's eyes and swallowed before saying, "I damn near killed someone on accident. From *one* strike."

Nate blinked at him, face a little pale. He asked, "Why?"

"...I never intended for him to be hurt that badly. But I was an enforcer and he had damn near broken my goalie's leg. He had *enjoyed* it and I was *so angry*. I punched his temple once, bare fisted, and he went down. He was unconscious before his head cracked open on the ice."

He never should have mentioned the story, remembering now the horrifying sound of that boy's head hitting the ice, realizing that he might have killed someone. He had put every ounce of strength in his body into that one punch and it had taken him a while to react. Alfred had to pull him away gently while the med team picked up the boy and rushed him out. He hadn't even realized that he had been crying until Alfred ushered him off the ice and into their team box. The other team was furious, but it had only been one punch.

The game ended then, with a full period left. No one wanted to play with that much fresh blood recently spilled. He thought that he was going to be arrested or have to deal with grieving parents. But the boy had woken after three days and been mostly okay. Apparently he didn't mind that Matthew had almost killed him, mostly impressed that someone who seemed so small could almost kill him with one punch. He even said that he would have done the same to anyone who went after his goalie like he went after Matthew's.

Hockey is a weird, weird sport.

It had taken a full week before Matthew was able to go to an ice rink, let alone step on the ice. It had taken much, *much* longer to be okay with violence, to be able to defend himself and those he cared for. It was all about how much control you had and he vowed to never lose his control like that again. He knew that he was serious about kicking Matthias' ass if he didn't stop the teasing, but he would have never hit him with all of his strength.

"Matthew." Nate said simply, hands on both his of his shoulders and head ducked to try and meet Matthew's eyes. "Matthew, it's all right."

Matthew blinked and shook himself. "Sorry." He looked around and realized that several of their teammates were looking at him now with a mix of curiosity and concern.

"...Are you okay?"

"Honestly? No. But there's nothing to be done about that." Matthew forced himself to smile and it felt brittle. "Only good thing to come of that was that, once I was able to play again, absolutely *no one* ever fucked with my goalies."

Nate's brow furrowed. "Silver linings, I guess. I won't tell anyone, in case you were wondering." He straightened and thankfully changed the subject before Matthew had a chance to respond, though he kept glancing at Matthew out of the corner of his eye. Nate was approaching chatty, sharing more about himself in that half hour commute between the ice rink and campus than he had for the past two weeks.

Matthew almost shook his head. He didn't know how hearing how he almost killed someone made Nate want to be friends with him, but he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. He had gotten so few horses in the past that he knew not to push his luck.

Lovino blew out a gusty sigh and braced himself. His 11am class just ended and he was in the biology building. It was a gamble but he wasn't a teenager. He was a mature adult, dammit, and he was not going to be weird about this!

Lovino: hey just got out of class in the bio building. u got a sec?

Before he could second guess himself, he hit send. He then got out of his chair, scooped up his backpack, and strode out of the classroom, head held high but insides quivering. Fuck, he shouldn't have sent that! He should have just waited until practice to seek out Antonio! He was going to look clingy and desperate and-

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out of his pocket so fast that it almost flew from his hand. That would have been embarrassing.

TB: hey! yeah just give me a minute

TB: almost to campus now. meet me outside?

Lovino took three deep breaths, calming himself. Nothing was a problem! It was all okay!

God, this was a bad idea.

Lovino: ok

He now had a couple of minutes to freak out about how this was going to go. Was Antonio going to be distant? Not likely considering the tone of the texts. Would he touch Lovino in greeting? Did Lovino even want Antonio to touch him?

Well, yes. That was a stupid question to ask himself.

What did he want from this conversation?

First, he wanted to figure out what Antonio wanted from him. That was a question that had kept him awake and would determine how everything else went. Second, he wanted to discuss how this was going to play out at practice.

Third, and this was a low priority, he wanted to tell Antonio what *he* wanted. He wanted him to know that no one had ever touched him like that, made him feel that cherished for what should have been a one-night stand. Lovino wanted him to know just how much he appreciated that, how he didn't take it for granted and how much it meant to him.

What he *didn't* want him to know was that Lovino was ready to take just about any arrangement that he could get that would allow them to keep sleeping together. He drew the line at anything humiliating and demeaning but something told him that Antonio wouldn't think to ask for any situation like that. Matthew's words had taken root with the memory of how Antonio had look at him, spoken to him, touched him. It made him hope, made him want to be vulnerable and seek something more than just friendly fucking. Hope was a dangerous thing and he had been burned before.

"Lovi!"

Lovino looked around and saw Antonio approaching him with a wide smile, no sense of malice or disgust. Just...happiness at seeing him.

Lovino was happy to see him, too. "Took you long enough, bastard." He internally flinched at his own words, at how he could never just fucking *say* what he wanted. But his tone was fond and Antonio didn't seem bothered.

In fact, the man was beaming at him as he approached. "Did you miss me, then?"

Illogically, yes, I did. "No," he grumbled as Antonio finally made it to him and leaned down as if to kiss him. He automatically tilted his face up to allow it, body telling the truth that his words would not, but Antonio stopped and pulled himself back.

"Ah! Sorry." Antonio took a step away from him, blushing, and Lovino frowned at him. Did he not want to kiss him in public? Was he ashamed to be seen with him like that?

"Why?" He snapped, self-doubt making his tone sharp and Antonio flinched, leaning further out of his space. That wasn't what Lovino wanted.

"...You probably don't want me to kiss you in public, haha." Antonio looked upset now at the edges of his expression and looked away from him.

"You idiot." Antonio cringed and Lovino felt like shit. He did not deserve this man, didn't deserve what he willing gave. But he was a selfish, wretched creature and wasn't ready to let him go yet. So he stepped into his space and kissed his cheek before quickly stepping back, face flaring in embarrassment, at the risk he just took. Antonio looked back at him with wide, hopeful eyes and Lovino said grumpily, arms crossed in front of him. "Don't let it happen again. The...not public thing, I mean. Like I would care about that."

Antonio's face lit up but he made no further move to touch him, which was...fine. "Okay, Lovi. What did you want to talk about?"

What did he want to talk about, again?

Oh. Right.

"We should walk." Lovino blurted instead of answering, finding he wasn't ready for the conversation. "Don't you have somewhere to be?" *Why am I like this?!* "I mean, you were already on your way to campus." *Nice recovery, dumbass.*

Antonio shrugged but started walking down a path towards the front of the campus. "I was coming to do lab work but it's nothing urgent."

"...okay."

A long moment passed as Lovino tried to work up the courage to say what he wanted, when Antonio asked quietly, "Is this about the...last weekend?"

"Yeah." Lovino took a deep breath and said, "We're not kids so I'm trying not to dance around the issue here."

"Issue?" Antonio said carefully, voice strange but Lovino found that he couldn't look him in the eye.

He was trying not to curse, to make sure that Antonio knew he was serious. "You know? The *well that happened now what* issue. What happened...I see no issue there."

"Neither do I." Antonio's voice was soft and Lovino flicked his eyes over to him only to look away when he found he was being watched. Antonio was always watching him. It made him feel like he was looking for some reason to go and abandon him, but his mind knew that wasn't the case....right?

"Great. Fucking wonderful. So, what do you want?" Could he *be* blunter?

"What do you mean?" *God, he is going to make me spell everything out?!*

Lovino took a deep breath and chose his words very carefully. "What do you want from me? Do you want anything to come of...this?" He made an abortive gesture to imply *us* but stopped because he felt like a fool.

"Lovi, I want you to look at me." Lovino stiffened but tried to do as he asked. They were walking over grass now, headed for a tree that was removed from the busier walkways. Antonio was looking at him with an expression Lovino didn't know how to label, but it seemed gentle. *He is so fucking beautiful and wonderful. Oh, God, why did I ever think he would actually want something with me? He's good and light and caring and I'm the most abrasive son of a bitch around.* Lovino kept his spine straight but his confidence in the conversation was being eaten away. "What exactly are you asking me?"

Date me. Never stop treating me like I matter. Say you want to keep me close. Make me yours. Claim me as yours and become mine. He swallowed, the words stuck in his throat. "What do you want to happen now? Between us, I mean."

Antonio knew he had to tread very carefully here or risk burning a bridge that Lovino had so painstakingly built. Lovino *had* kissed him, had been upset with him for pulling away rather than trying for affection in public.

He was quiet as he sat at the foot of the tree he had been leading them to. He knew that he shouldn't take long, that Lovino's mind was already working against anything he had to say. More and more light leached from his eyes, uncertainty closing him off little by little. This was as private as he could get them outside at noon on a nice late summer day. This would work and hopefully make Lovino more comfortable.

The second his companion sat down cross-legged in front of him, Antonio started, "I wanted to kiss you when I first saw you. And I want to kiss you now. I liked making you breakfast. I liked sleeping with you, loved making love to you. I want to make you smile."

There was a sense of stillness coming from Lovino, like he was a frightened prey animal and Antonio was about to eat him. Was he afraid of commitment? Is that it? Does *Antonio* want commitment, this early in the school year? They were both twenty, but they had just met. They were *so young* to commit to anything. But what did that matter, really? "...What does that add up to, Tonio?"

Oh, he loved how Lovino said his name like that, like it was something secret and not what the majority of people called him. "I'm not sure," he answered truthfully. "I want to find out, though. What do *you* want, Lovino?"

Lovino glanced away before seeming for force himself to look at Antonio. He opened his mouth, visibly struggled to say something, before closing it and starting again. "I...don't want things to get weird between us. I like your stupid face and your dumb laugh and...you. I like you. I *want*—" He seemed to choke on something and cleared his throat. "I feel the same way you do."

His hands itched to touch him, so he did. He reached forward and stilled Lovino's absent, anxious fidgeting. He lightly moved his thumb over the back of one of Lovino's hands and said, thinking it the best course of action, "We don't have to label it, you know." The only way he could tell that tension filled him was by the sudden woodenness of his hands. "If it would make you more comfortable."

He watched as Lovino closed his eyes and something dark seemed to pass in his expression, but he relaxed and looked at Antonio once more. "If that's what you want, then I'm fine with that. But I...I need to know what that means in practice on a few things. Just so there aren't misunderstandings."

Negotiate. He wants them to negotiate like this was a transaction. Antonio couldn't stop the frown but was happy that he hadn't asked him for a date or anything like that. He wasn't even sure if he *wanted* to date Lovino, to try and see if he could become his boyfriend. "Okay, that makes sense. First thing, I'm a pretty affectionate person and tend to touch people I like. With this...thing, I'm going to probably reach out to touch you a lot." Like now, when he would actually prefer them both to be sitting with their back against the tree and his arm around Lovino so that they were close enough to kiss if they wanted.

Lovino nodded and said, "This won't affect how you treat me as a mentee or in practice, though. The power dynamic there is a bit off and I don't want either of us to get in trouble for it."

"Okay. I want us to actually hang out. I want to know more about you, Lovi. I really do want us to be friends."

"So, you want us to be something like friends with benefits?" Lovino asked, eyes carefully neutral.

Antonio thought they had agreed on no labels but was fine answering this question. "I doubt friends with benefits touch as much as I probably will end up reaching for you. You can tell me no, you know. If I'm being too much for you. You can always tell me no." The *last* thing he wanted to do was scare Lovino off.

"I know," Lovino said softly and he finally responded to Antonio's touch, fingers tracing nonsense patterns on his skin. "About the sex..."

"How about we just let each other know directly if we want that?" Antonio said, hoping this could be easy for them.

Lovino winced. "That...might happen a lot."

God, I hope so. "I don't see a problem with that."

"Do you want to be exclusive?" Lovino asked, fingers hesitating only for a second.

Was this a trap? It felt like a trap. Exclusivity implied a lot, would be a lot of commitment on Lovino's part. He thought about the possibility of someone else sleeping with Lovino, hearing his moans and cries, leaving their marks on his skin, and seeing his post-coitus smile. He *burned* at that, a predator he kept sleeping in the back of his mind waking, displeased at the notion. But Lovino was not his, had made that clear. "No, I don't."

It was a lie. The first he had ever told him.

Lovino's hand hesitated again and Antonio thought that the boy in front of him was shaking for a second, before he nodded. He said with a calm, even voice, "Okay. So more than friends with benefits and less than dating. I can work with that."

Lovino looked at his phone and startled. "Shit! I have to go. Fuck, I didn't notice the time. I'm going to be late!" Lovino went to stand but Antonio halted him with a soft hand on his knee.

"Kiss me before you go, *hermoso*?" He even said it with a little pout, hoping to see more than careful neutrality in Lovino's eyes. Despite his apparent tardiness, they still held very little emotion and he wanted to change that, put some light into them. Lovino's mouth twitched into a slight smile and Antonio got his wish.

"I *guess*." Lovino leaned into him and nothing about this kiss was begrudging or neutral. No, Lovino kissed him hard, like he needed him more than air and Antonio was thrown completely through a loop. Lovino was hiding something from him, something that would have him use a poker face only to kiss him this desperately.

Before he really had time to react, Lovino pulled away and said, "I hope you're satisfied, bastard, because that's all you're going to get for now." Only Lovino could make a curse sound like an endearment but oh, his eyes weren't neutral anymore. They were angry, *so* angry.

"Lovi-!" Antonio started but his...person had already started moving away.

"See you at practice!" Lovino said, walking quickly away from him with a wave. Antonio watched as Lovino put his head down and started jogging back towards the residential part of campus.

He wondered what the rush was, what Lovino was really feeling. He thought that their talk went well, though. Antonio really was excited to be able to touch him and sleep with him and spend time with him. Lovino didn't want commitment? That was fine since Antonio wasn't ready for it either. This was for the best.

If he told himself that enough times, maybe he could forget the anger in Lovino's eyes and the frantic need in his kiss.

Lovino didn't have anywhere to be but his room. He *refused* to cry in public, but he was close to his rope's end. His mind was filled with mantra that was like a record of his worst hits on repeat.

Track 1: *He doesn't want you.*

Track 2: *He doesn't need you.*

Track 3: *You don't deserve him anyway.*

Track 4: *You would have fucked up anything more.*

Track 5: *Because you're a fuck-up. And that's why...*

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

He should have known better than to hope. He *did* know better! He knew better than to think that someone like Antonio would want more than a convenient fuck his the pocket with

someone like him.

He wasn't going to make it to his room.

Lovino avoided the always-crowded elevator and hit the stairs, racing up seven levels and stumbling on exhausted legs to his room.

Matthew was out, probably eating before his class at one, and Lovino was thankful. Best friend or not, they had to be friends for at least a couple of months before he got to bear witness to this...mess.

Lovino slammed the door behind him, tears spilling from his eyes, and collapsed to the floor, legs giving out. He tried not to make a sound as he sobbed, but it was hard. Just something else he failed at.

He was crying over a boy he had known for something like two weeks. Fucking pathetic.

He hated himself for how weak he was. He thought about downing one of the bottles of wine in his closet but resisted. He couldn't show up to practice drunk. No need for Antonio to know just how much this hurt him. It was enough that the other boy had such power over him; he didn't need to know about it.

Once his brain stopped torturing him long enough to actually function, Lovino cleaned himself up, took a couple of pain killers for the headache that had developed, and really thought over the relationship he agreed to have with Antonio.

Did Lovino really like *him*? Or was Antonio just the first person to make him feel special?

His mind brought up their shared studies, their team, the sex, and how Antonio made him feel as he made him breakfast. He sighed. *Nope, just him.*

It would have been easier if he could have convinced himself otherwise. At least he knew where he stood with him.

For now, Lovino had to get rid of all signs that he had been crying and get on with his day.

Ludwig found Matthew already waiting for him when he arrived at the library later that evening. He appreciated punctuality and had come to rely on it when it came to his new friend. Ludwig hadn't seen him since the activity fair on Friday and he had only known him for a week but something seemed...off. Matthew smiled at him in greeting when he saw him approaching, but there was something subdued and sad in his expression.

"Hello, Matthew," he said quietly, not wanting to disturb people as he sat down. "Forgive me, but is everything all right? You seem...troubled."

Matthew flinched and Ludwig did not find that comforting. "Yes, I'm okay. Just had a rough morning and I'm pretty tired. I only need to sleep it off. How are you?"

"I am well, thank you. How did you find the assignment?" It had taken Ludwig hours to finish it, let alone understand the material.

Matthew cringed and said, "A lot. There were a couple of things I wanted to discuss? Not everything makes sense to me."

They dove into the work, Ludwig finding Matthew's perspectives intriguing. He usually lost his patience with people who failed to understand something he did even after talking it through, but Matthew was quick. Their work did seem to drain him, however, the boy slouching more and more and they went on, rubbing his shoulder with a pained look on his face.

Ludwig knew he was frowning now, genuinely concerned, and was about to ask once again if something was wrong, when someone else beat him to it. "Ve, Mattie? Are you okay?"

The boy who approached them was slight with tousled brown hair and a natural tan. He moved with an ease that hinted at athleticism but didn't advertise it.

Ludwig saw Matthew look up and smile at the newcomer. "Oh. Hey, Feli. Yeah, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." Ludwig agreed with that much at least. Matthew seemed to curl into himself more and Ludwig couldn't help but think of him once more as a golden retriever puppy. This Feli seemed to have a similar thought, reaching out towards Matthew as if to comfort him. He looked over at Ludwig then and stopped himself, almost freezing on the spot, as if remembering that they weren't alone. He blinked striking gold eyes at him and winced. "Sorry, I know I'm interrupting. But he—" Feli gestured at Matthew as if his expression explained everything and, honestly? Ludwig didn't blame him.

Ludwig nodded and said gently, "Matthew, perhaps we should stop here. We got through most of it and you should rest."

Feli seemed to see where this was going. "Listen to the smart boy, Mattie. Ve, why don't you walk to the dorm with me? I need to change for practice and was going there anyway."

Ludwig watched Matthew straighten his spine and clench his jaw. "I'm. Fine." He bit out.

Feli shared a look with Ludwig that said clearly that he didn't believe him either. They both stared at him silently until Matthew deflated and muttered, "But I am kinda tired."

Shutting his book, Ludwig nodded as if this decided things. "Then go home, Matthew."

Matthew seemed worse off than when they had started. "Okay. I'm sorry, Ludwig."

"You have no reason to be sorry," Ludwig said, surprised to feel the urge to reach out and touch him. The poor boy seemed like he could use all the reassurance he could get. "I will see you tomorrow."

Matthew packed up and they started to head towards the exit as a group. When Matthew and Feli parted ways with Ludwig at the door, the latter looked over his shoulder at him and mouthed the words, *thank you*.

Ludwig nodded, arrested by those strange eyes until the other boy turned away. Ludwig shook himself and headed home.

"Well?" Matthew asked about two minutes into walking back to the dorms with Feliciano.

Feliciano frowned at him, clearly too worried to catch his meaning. Matthew felt a little bad about that, but he *did* feel like shit, always felt awful after really remembering what happened that day. He only...exaggerated his exhaustion a bit. He was bone weary and would probably go to sleep very early that night, though he did want to stay up long enough to talk to Lovino after soccer practice.

"Well, what, Mattie?"

"Was Ludwig the guy you saw that first week?"

Feliciano blinked at him then actually scowled. "Ve, you've been faking this entire time!?"

Matthew winced. "No, I do feel pretty bad. I had a really long day. It was only after you got to the table that I decided to play it up a bit."

"Oh. What happened this morning? Are your teammates still picking on you?" Feliciano knew that his team had been a problem, but only Lovino really knew the full extent of it.

"No, I got them to stop. I just...did something I'm not really proud of." He was referring to something that happened years ago, but vague terms seemed about his speed.

"I'm sure you only did what you had to do," Feliciano said before abruptly pulling him into a surprisingly strong hug.

Startled, Matthew's arms hung in the air for a second. "Um...?"

"Hug me back!"

"Okay!" Matthew did so, tentatively. Not many people touched him like this and he wasn't quite comfortable with the contact. But it was...nice.

Feliciano pulled back, looked at his face and smiled. "See! Hug therapy always works a little." Matthew couldn't help smiling back. "And to answer your question, yes. Ludwig is who I was talking about. He's a little intimidating. But...he really was concerned about you, so I know he has a heart somewhere in that huge chest of his."

How sweet!

"...He could also probably break me in half if I asked him to."

Feliciano laughed at Matthew's immediate look of discomfort.

Gilbert was surprised to hear the door open so early that evening. Ludwig was supposed to be studying with Matthew for a while yet, ruining the surprise he had going in the slow cooker. What made him concerned was the frown on his brother's face when he walked in. "Sup, West? You're home early. I've got beef stew started." It was one of his brother's favorite meals.

Ludwig paused in his path through the house and Gilbert saw some of the tension leak out of him. "Thank you, Gilbert. It smells great."

"Is everything okay?" Gilbert asked, sitting up and watching his brother carefully. He saw Ludwig consider whether to answer him truthfully or not and mentally sighed. He knew all of his brother's tells and honestly didn't know why he bothered trying to lie to him in the first place.

Ludwig settled on saying, "Something's bothering Matthew."

Gilbert tensed at the information. He didn't tell Ludwig about his run-in with his friend Saturday morning and was betting that Matthew didn't mention it, either. He wasn't sure if Matthew told Ludwig about his team bullying him and didn't want to let it slip if he was keeping that private. Gilbert had caught him off-guard, but he got the feeling the Matthew was a private person. "Did he say what it was?"

A muscle in Ludwig's jaw twitched as he fought his concern and frustration. "No. He only said that he had a rough morning and was tired."

"...does the hockey team practice in the morning?" Gilbert hedged, knowing that they did after Saturday but wanting to give his brother an opening to tell him more.

Ludwig frowned. "Yes, they do. You think it may be a problem with his team?"

Gilbert shrugged. "I'm not sure. I know it's hard to be a student athlete and he's still transitioning to being here. Just a guess."

"Maybe..." Ludwig trailed off and continued out of the room. Gilbert switch topics, asking him about his day. At the same time, he pulled out his phone and went to the *Four Horsemen** group chat.

W: hey anyone hear something about hockey practice this morning?

Alistair was plugged into the most vital cyber sources of information around the school, but Francis was the one to go to for gossip. People liked talking to Francis, but found Alistair off-putting for some reason. Antonio was probably at practice, so he was unlikely to answer. Then again, why would he know about it? Lord knows his friend had his hands full with that Lovino kid.

It only took a few minutes for someone to answer.

D: Why do you want to know?

Dammit, Alistair.

W: just curious

D: About a certain blond freshman?

F: *eyes*

W: ...yeah. West said he was upset about something

F: *eyes* *eyes*

D: *eyes*

P: *eyes*

He hated his friends.

F: I'll ask around discretely.

D: I'll see what I can do.

P: i would ask Lovi but something tells me he won't be very forthcoming

He loved his friends. But...

W: ...what did you do

P: Nothing! We talked earlier and he was cool. We're going to play this by ear

P: though he and Feli yelled at each other in Italian for a while

P: and Feli keeps glaring at me

W: Im no expert but I think you fucked up

F: I'm an expert and you fucked up

P: rude

P: I only did what he wanted

W: aren't you at practice rn

P: yeah l8r

Ridiculous.

Gilbert focused on finishing up dinner and checking in with Ludwig. It was only later when he's going over his schedule for the next day that Alistair got back to them with a link. Gilbert frowned and clicked it, opening a video that started with two people in hockey gear,

sticks in hand and leaning over the ice. The picture was a little shaky but the audio was surprisingly good.

"I'll just brace myself for the humiliation, then." The voice was Matthew's, discernable even though it was a tone that Gilbert had never personally heard from him.

He was one of the two people on the ice.

A whistle shrieked through the phone and the two hockey players started moving, Gilbert guessing that the slighter of them was Matthew.

What followed was the most intriguing five minutes and thirty seconds he had ever seen.

Matthew was *fast* and so fucking capable. The first goal was normal enough, though Gilbert wasn't particularly familiar with the sport. Strangely, the other player seemed surprised that Matthew had managed.

"The clock is still ticking, Denson!" Denson? As in Matthias Denson? Gilbert knew him well enough. He was fun to play drinking games with and Gilbert vaguely remembered him being important on the hockey team.

Why was Matthew facing off with an upperclassman of Denson's caliber?

And why was he *winning*?

The video continued and Gilbert found that his breath had caught when the two started charging at each other from what seemed like opposite ends of the rink. The person holding the camera caught Matthias' wide smile and figured out where the two would collide. Then Matthew did something incredible with his skates, flung ice into the junior's eyes, and headed back across the rink to score again.

The sound coming from what Gilbert could only assume were the rest of the team was deafening. Someone, perhaps the videographer, said very quietly, "Holy shit."

"Denson, *don't*—" The voice that Gilbert guessed was the coach called and his heart stuttered as he watched the much larger man speed towards Matthew and swing at him...only to hit empty air. Matthew had dodged so smoothly, with incredible balance considering he was on skates, and seemed to help Matthias along just enough for him to smack into a wall.

Matthew skated gracefully backwards, confident in his movements, as he called out causally, asking for the time. When the older man answered, the camera zoomed in enough to see Matthew's face clearly. He snarled in challenge as he said, eyes intent on Matthias, "Come on, *Denson*. Make me *work* for it."

Gilbert couldn't remember the last time he had been so attracted to a person.

He watched in awe as the match continued, the coach asking how Matthew (he learned his last name was Williams) had gotten so angry. When someone answered, he understood Matthew's behavior on Saturday. What followed was the most complicated dance Gilbert had ever seen on ice, their movements violent but purposeful and so fucking powerful.

The match ended with Matthias shooting the puck towards Matthew's face, only for him to catch it. He watched Matthew skate towards Matthias, voice low enough for Gilbert to miss what he hissed in his face, but his expression was full of cold rage. Matthias said something soft and, after a moment, they were smiling at each other, neither having moved away after Matthew's threatening approach. The video ended with someone calling out, "So are you two going to kiss now or—?"

It took Gilbert a minute to process all of that.

He maybe took a minute to walk around. Just to get a glass of water, of course.

He might have watched the video again, pausing at what he thought were the highlights.

Gilbert closed the video and saw that his friends had taken advantage of his prolonged silence.

D: Still want to tell me you're not interested?

P: Woowooooow

F: If he was upset, it wasn't about that. A little bird told me that he had a moment with another freshman when they were leaving that left him shaken, but that's it.

F: Wait, his last name is Williams?

P: why does that matter? Gil is probably still picking his jaw off the floor and wiping drool from his chin

P: btw I just want to state again my concern over how attracted you are to controlled violence

P: you might want to talk to a professional about that

D: You don't have the moral ground to kinkshame him.

F: lol

D: Neither do you.

F: oh I know that. You know I'm one to encourage such things.

P: why am I friends with you?

F: you love me :P

Gilbert sighed. Once more into the abyss.

W: there was a lot to process

D: he speaks!

P: I really hope you just watched the video three times in a row

F: lol I hope he did something else with that time

W: Francis you are gross

F: *blows kiss* love you too

D: Well? Still going to let the fact that he's a first year and your brother's friend stop you?

Gilbert hesitated but knew the answer.

W: No

He wouldn't go so far as to call dibs because that wasn't how you treated people but...

W: if something happens then something happens

F: but are you actually going to go after him?

P: no bars hold?

Gilbert paused and remembered Matthew's soft voice and blush and smile. Then he remembered how he fought and skated and snarled.

W: yes

D: FINALLY

He just...wouldn't tell Ludwig. Not yet.

Matthew was working in his room when he heard two raised voices spitting Italian at each other. He tried not to wince.

Matthew hadn't seen Lovino all day and they were just coming in from soccer practice. He hoped that Lovino's interactions with Antonio had gone well, but, judging from the noise, he gave up on that.

The door clicked open and Feliciano pushed his way into the room first. Seeing him, he switched to English. "Matthew! A voice of reason!"

Red flags popped up in his head. "Uhh..."

"I *am* being reasonable," Lovino snapped at his brother and he closed the door behind him. "I'm being *realistic*."

"No, you're being a coward." Lovino bodily flinched from that jab and Feliciano seemed to regret it instantly. "Ve, I'm sorry, Lovi. Listen, you deserve more than this. I want you to have more than this."

Lovino looked away from his brother. "It's more than I ever expected, Feli. Just let me have this, okay?"

Almost afraid to interject, Matthew asked, "What happened?"

Feliciano stared at his brother until Lovino sighed and said, "Antonio and I have an arrangement."

"An...arrangement." Matthew repeated, not sure where to take that.

"Yes. We hang out, be friends, and fuck each other. On a non-exclusive basis."

These were dangerous waters, but Matthew hedged. "That sounds like dating?"

"Nope." Lovino said, popping the 'p' sound and eyes betraying just how much that hurt. "More than friends with benefits, less than dating. He doesn't want to be tied down."

"Jesus, he actually said that to you? In those words?" Matthew asked, astonished.

"No, but he said enough. That's fine. It's my first year and only the second week of classes. No need to make any decisions about anything now." Lovino said this coldly but his eyes stayed on the carpet.

Feliciano looked imploringly at Matthew, asking him silently to understand that this wasn't acceptable. But Matthew *did* understand. He understood where Lovino was coming from, that his best friend had fallen hard and fast for someone he didn't think would want him and was willing to take whatever Antonio would give.

In talking over the past couple of weeks, Lovino had let slip the fact that Feliciano was the family favorite, that he was doted on and loved by all. Lovino had just been a going-nowhere ugly duckling (his words) until he managed to claw his way into university. He wasn't used to being loved, knew the value of any kind of affection and wouldn't take it for granted. And Matthew understood that all too well.

This was his choice and, in Lovino's place, Matthew knew that he would make the same decision.

"Feli," Matthew started softly. "Let this go."

Feliciano dropped his jaw and Lovino looked at him in tentative gratitude. "You can't be serious! Mattie, you *know* that this isn't—"

"Feliciano. Let. It. Go." Feliciano stopped talking, eyes blazing but finally seeing that Matthew and Lovino were serious.

"Unbelievable. I don't understand this."

Lovino sighed and met Matthew's eyes in recognition. Speaking to his brother, he said, "I hope you never do."

Feliciano left and silence descended between them. At length, Matthew stated the obvious. "This will hurt."

Lovino closed his eyes but nodded. "Doesn't everything?"

Matthew had no helpful response and they dropped it. After some time passed Lovino asked if he was okay. "Feli said that something was wrong before he noticed the Antonio thing."

...He felt like he should tell Lovino about the accident. They were in a somber space for sharing things like this and had reached some understanding born of shared pain. But he didn't want Lovino to look at him differently, didn't want his friend to fear his temper or call him a monster. He stayed quiet, almost deciding to tell him when his phone dinged with an incoming urgent email.

Matthew frowned to see it was from his coach. The subject line was "Video from Today."

Matthew paled.

"Oh, my God."

Lovino was instantly on edge. "What? What is it?"

He hastily opened the email and the body of the text was short and to the point.

I don't care which one of you miscreants filmed Williams and Denson or why you did it. Just take the damn thing down.

What video?

"Oh, my God," Matthew repeated, horrified.

"Matthew, *what*-?"

"There's a video. From this morning."

"...fucking shit."

Matthew turned to his computer and sent back a frantic reply to his coach.

Dear Coach Morgendorffer,

What video?

Respectfully,

Matthew Williams

He hit send.

It took thirty seconds for him to realize he had hit reply all.

He knew because Nate replied directly to him with a link and the comment, *I did not know this was being recorded. I'm sorry.*

He followed the link and saw the beginning of the video, saw just how much of a difference he and Matthias were in size from a distance before stopping it.

"Lovi—"

"Let it play, Mattie."

He did.

He watched himself move, winced at how reckless and foolish he had been in his anger. Lovino stayed silent and just reached over his shoulder to put the video to full screen and turn up the volume. He heard Lovino's breath catch when the ice sprayed and when Matthias slammed into the wall. Matthew was horrified by the rage on his face and painfully aware that everyone who watched knew the things that Matthias had said to him.

The video ended abruptly and Matthew noted that it really did look like he and Matthias were going to kiss from the outside.

Matthew hit escape as Lovino whistled long and low. There were a couple hundred hits already and it had been uploaded three hours ago to a generic Youtube account. "Ho. Ly. Shit."

Matthew flinched. "I know it was a lot—"

"That was fucking awesome!" Lovino said, stepping back from him. Matthew turned to see his friend grinning. "I didn't know you could do that!"

"You didn't think it was too much?"

"Too much! Oh, *hell* no! It was perfect! He looked like he was close to falling to his knees and worshiping you after that."

Matthew snorted and rolled his eyes. "Come off it."

"Are you telling me you didn't see that? You're saying there was *no* sexual tension at the end?"

Matthew frowned. "No? Not from my end at least." Lovino was quiet for a long moment and looking at him like he had started speaking in Latin. "What?"

"You like men, yes?"

"Yes?" Matthew said, not understanding this line of questioning.

"You know that Denson is hot, right?"

Matthew frowned harder. "Sure, he's handsome and capable, but I don't know if I would describe him as hot."

Lovino was staring at him again. Matthew's phone beeped with a text message and he stiffened when he saw who it was.

Gilbert. It was Gilbert.

Gilbert: Happy to see that you weren't bluffing when you said you could handle it

"What is it? You got this weird look on your face."

"Gil texted me."

"What?"

"He saw the video."

"*No!* You're shitting me!" Lovino was suddenly pressed against his side, staring at his phone as he opened the message. He blinked hard. Nope, it hadn't changed.

"What do I say back?!"

"Something about being able to *handle* anything." Matthew was confused until he looked over to see Lovino literally wiggling his eyebrows at him. He lightly pushed him away.

"Not that!" he cried, laughing. "I'm serious, Lovi! I don't know how to do this!"

"Give it here." Lovino tried to snatch his phone away but Matthew pulled it away to his chest protectively at the last minute, eyes wary. "Come on. I promise I won't send anything without your express permission beforehand."

Matthew narrowed his eyes but gave him his phone. Lovino tapped something out quickly, looked back at Matthew for a long moment, and deleted everything. Then he tried again and handed it over for approval. Matthew nodded.

Matthew: You saw the video then?

Matthew: Happy not to disappoint. It's not my fault Matthias underestimated me.

The answer was quick in coming.

Gilbert: Yeah, I did. And I'll keep that in mind.

"What does that mean? Lovi, what does this mean?" Matthew said, showing his friend the phone.

Slowly, evilly Lovino smiled at him. "That means, my dear Mattie, that you've officially got him on the hook. Congratu-fuckin'-lations."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the coach's name is from "Daria." Brilliant show, that. Disclaimer: I actually know very little about hockey.

Nate is now a member of the Matthew Williams Defense Squad (MWDS). Nate also saw what Ludwig would describe as the "kicked puppy" look and who doesn't want to protect puppies?

So most of the hockey team ship Matthew and Matthias now. Then again, they haven't seen him with Gilbert...yet.

Title is from Ella Fence's "Hunter." "And I'll hide underneath my pride and you will wonder. 'Cause I'm a wolf, I'm a wolf, and you're my hunter."

Chapter 7: It Won't Do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Matthew hadn't responded to Gilbert's other text the night before, too nervous and uncertain to let Lovino goad him into it. His mind was still spinning with the thought of Gilbert's reaction to watching the video as he walked in psychology that afternoon. *What did he think of my skating? Of what Matthias had teased me over? What about that video really made him text me? What was the point of the text? Did it only mean what the words had said, or was Lovino right and Gilbert is actually interested in me? Isn't that a big leap to make? Why would Gilbert like me!? All I've done is embarrass himself in front of him! What would make Gilbert different from everyone else I've ever met?*

He cursed himself for being so preoccupied when he met with Ludwig after class. Even before Ludwig said anything, Matthew could read the smallest signs of concern on his friend's stoic face. He only then realized that he had forgotten to ask himself the most immediate concern when it came to dealing with Gilbert.

What did he tell Ludwig?

His friendship with Ludwig had nothing to do with Gilbert and he didn't want him to think he was only using him to get closer to his brother. Should he mention it or not?

What had *really* happened between him and Gilbert? Nothing was the answer. Sure, they had ran into each other and exchanged numbers. He had told Gilbert about his small problem with his team and Gilbert had congratulated him on handling it well. That's it! Bringing up Gilbert now would just plant seeds of doubt in Ludwig's mind when there was nothing happening between them in the first place!

All this ran through his head as he smiled at his friend in greeting and said, "Hey, Ludwig."

"Hello, Matthew. Are you feeling better?" They turned to walk out of the building together.

"Yes, thank you. I'm sorry again for leaving early yesterday. I..." Matthew cleared his throat and Ludwig gave him time to finish his thought. "You wouldn't have happened to see a video about me yesterday, did you?"

Ludwig gave him a strange look and Matthew realized just how odd that question was. "No, Matthew, I did not. What happened?"

Matthew sighed and looked sheepishly at the taller boy. "I may have neglected to mention that I was kinda being bullied by my team—"

"You *what?!?*" Ludwig stopped in his tracks and turned to him, anger clear on his face and Matthew was pretty sure that it wasn't directed at him.

Matthew adjusted his glasses and said, “Yeah. Um, they basically thought I was too small to be useful on the team and a waste of space?”

Ludwig stared at him and his face went cold. “Have they hurt you?”

“No! No, it never got that bad. And I handled it yesterday morning! I won a one-on-one game with one of the older players so they respect me now and have even apologized!” Matthew started walking again since he really had to be getting to French Cinema and Ludwig thankfully followed.

“This is why you were tired,” Ludwig stated, though it was more of a question.

Matthew winced. “Partially. It also reminded me of something that happened a long time ago that takes it out of me. Turns out one of my teammates recorded a video and put it on YouTube last night. Hundreds of people saw it before it was taken down and one of my friends on the team was recorded explaining in detail to the coach just why I was angry enough to challenge the other guy.”

Ludwig was quiet for a bit before he said, “I am sorry you had to deal with that, Matthew. And please do not be sorry about yesterday; your health comes first.”

Matthew smiled up at him. “Thank you, Ludwig. How are you?”

“I am well, a bit tired. My brother surprised me with one of my favorite meals last night, but that is the extent of my life’s excitement at the moment.”

If Ludwig was expecting Matthew to ask after Gilbert, he was going to avoid that trap. “You know, we should hang out when we’re not studying or walking between classes. Give you some fun that isn’t food related.”

Ludwig seemed to startle at that but also had the beginnings of a smile on his face. “I would like that. What do you like to do?”

“I like reading, but that’s not particularly social. And—okay! I have three important questions for you.”

Ludwig made his face serious and Matthew had the feeling that he was humoring him. “Of course.”

“One: do you like movies?”

“Yes.”

“Two: are you one of those people who hates it when people comment on the movie even when you’re with friends?”

Ludwig hesitated and Matthew narrowed his eyes at him. Ludwig sighed and said with a smile edging into his expression again. “Yes, but I can ignore it for the sake of comradery.”

“Three: would you mind meeting a couple of new people?”

“No.”

Matthew grinned. “Great! Movie nights it is! We’ll start small, just you, me, my roommate, Lovino, and Feli. Lovi is Feli’s brother.”

“Feli is the same guy from yesterday, correct?” Ludwig asked and Matthew was pleased to note genuine interest in his eyes.

“Yes. Oh, I’m sorry; forgot to introduce you two properly. That was Feliciano. I met him the first day I moved in since he was with Lovi. He’s quite nice if a little optimistic. Lovi is...” How to describe his ornery best friend without scaring Ludwig off? “...wonderful but takes some getting used to. But he’s my best friend and since I’m thinking of hosting in our room it would be weird if he wasn’t there. You wouldn’t mind, right?”

Matthew made sure to make his eyes wide and hopeful as he said this. Ludwig had a look crossed between befuddlement and bemusement as he said, “Not as all, especially as you both would be hosting.”

Matthew beamed at him and said, “Great. Now, what are your favorite movies?”

Lovino knew he had literally run out of chances to avoid talking to Antonio when his team captain approached him after practice. Feliciano wasn’t talking to him, which was probably the best that he could ask for at the moment, particularly since it means he wasn’t talking to Antonio either. It had been all he could do to get him from confronting the junior the day before in front of the entire team. His silence was much preferred to the constant fear that his brother would broadcast both his feelings for Antonio and the nature of their relationship to everyone.

Well, part of their relationship at least. Matthew had been right on Saturday when he predicted that the entire team would know that he and Antonio had fucked each other after the game. No one had said anything to him, but there had been knowing and expectant glances going between them. Not a few of his teammates frowned at Lovino obviously avoiding him, probably having guessed at least some of what Feliciano had been so worked up about.

But the reason for Lovino staying away from Antonio and his general radio silence for his... lover (*God, that sounded weird but they weren’t fuck buddies or boyfriends or partners so what else was there?*) had more to do with the need to become desensitized to his presence. A little over five hours after having cried over the guy was not enough time for him to be able to keep his emotions under control if he had talked to him. Not nearly enough time to keep the hurt out of his eyes and Antonio always watched him *so* closely that it hadn’t been worth the risk.

Now, though, he had had the chance to adjust his mental parameters. As Matthew had said, this *would* hurt. He thought it was better than the alternative.

So Lovino acted like he hadn’t been viscerally aware of Antonio’s location for the past hour and a half and only turned towards him when he said, “Lovino?”

He did not tense. He did not sigh longingly. He made no outward sign of how much he wanted the boy in front of him. Instead, he frowned at him like the past four days had never happened and said, “What, bastard?” Lovino knew that his voice lacked the usual toxicity, but it was as close as he could get when talking to the person who had so thoroughly wrecked his emotions.

Antonio seemed taken aback by his response and Lovino crossed his arms in response, knowing that they had the attention of their teammates, cooling down from practice around them. Lovino didn’t know why; they had agreed that they would restrain themselves at practice and around the lab. “Could I talk to you for a second?”

Lovino narrowed his eyes at him, trying to read his face. “Yeah, sure,” he said brusquely before turning on his heel and marching away from the rest of their team. Antonio was following him by the sound of his footsteps and Lovino stopped when they were about fifty meters away from everyone else. Their practice field was a pretty open space, so distance was the only way to get even an illusion of privacy. Lovino consciously softened his voice as he asked, “What’s up?”

Antonio blinked at him. “What’s up? That’s what I was going to ask you. Between you avoiding me and what happened yesterday with Feli, I get the feeling that something’s wrong.”

Lovino clinched his jaw and looked away from him. “Look, I didn’t know how to treat you like nothing had changed while here. I’m still on shaky ground. And it’s not avoiding you; I had no reason to talk to you.”

“No *reason*--!” Antonio looked upset about that, but Lovino pushed on.

“—And about Feli, we yell at each other a lot. We’re Italian; it’s how we communicate sometimes. Don’t worry about it.”

Antonio frowned a little and leaned a little closer to him. Lovino held his ground, but it was an effort. “I get that on some level, but that doesn’t explain why he keeps glaring at me, Lovi. And what if I don’t want you to act like nothing’s changed? When we talked yesterday, I thought we were agreeing to no touching here, no special treatment, not a complete lack of interaction.”

Lovino glanced back at where everyone else was and found that a lot of eyes were on them, including those of their curious-looking coach. *Shit*. He looked back at Antonio and said, “Can this wait? Like just fifteen minutes? Coach is looking at us and I don’t want to get you in trouble.” When Antonio just stared at him, eyes searching his face, he pulled out the big guns. “Tonio, please.”

At those two words, Antonio seemed to relax a little, brow smoothing and body moving back. “Okay. Fifteen minutes.”

They walked back to the group without another word and Lovino broke away from him to go to where Feliciano was stretching. Lovino sat next to his brother and hissed at him in Italian, “*Stop glaring at him.*”

“Ve, why should I?” Feliciano answered, not bothering to look at him.

“Because you’re giving him the idea that something is wrong and I don’t know how to explain it to him.”

“Maybe you should figure that out, Lovi. Being with him hurts you. Did you think I would be okay with that?”

Lovino was starting to lose his temper. *“It’s not for you to be okay with, Feliciano. It’s my life and my choice. You don’t get a say in who I’m with.”*

Feliciano snorted. *“If you were actually with him I wouldn’t be having a problem.”*

Lovino flinched at that, at the reminder that he wasn’t worth having a relationship with. Just who was Feliciano to decide that he couldn’t have this? Who the fuck did he think he was to try and deny him this? After *everything*? Hurt and angry now, Lovino stood and snarled out, *“Fuck you.”*

“You know I’m right. And I’m going to keep glaring at him because he should know that being with him hurts you.”

In rapid, furious Italian he asked, *“Has it never fucking occurred to you that not being with him would hurt me more? Did it enter your mind for one goddamn second that he might actually make me feel good? That I’m with him for a fucking reason?”*

“Beyond self-loathing, you mean?” And *that* was like a knife to the gut, rending his insides until he was shredded and burning. Feliciano suddenly looked up at him, as if alarmed by what he just said. *“Lovi, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean—“*

“Vargas!”

Lovino stiffened and looked to where their coach stood, watching them with hands on his hips and expression torn between exasperation and bemusement. *“Yes, sir?”*

“My wife is Italian,” he started and Lovino paled. They hadn’t fought in front of him yesterday, but this...oh, God. He had to know about him and Antonio. *“This isn’t the place to discuss your love life.”*

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry; it won’t happen again.”

He snorted. *“Yeah, tell that to your boyfriend.”* Lovino had to look as close to fainting as he felt because the coach sighed and said in English. *“Listen up everyone because I’m only going to say this once. I couldn’t care less who you sleep with as long as it doesn’t negatively affect how you play. In that case, I won’t do anything besides tell you to fix it. Dismissed.”*

There was a stunned silence that lingered as Lovino felt his face heat so quickly that he was dizzy. Is there a way to sink into the earth and never return again? Just like...disappear and make everyone forget this ever happened? Especially him?

Since he couldn't expect the earth to do him any favors, he turned, grabbed his things, and immediately headed off the field. Or at least, that was his plan.

Feliciano stopped him before he made it two steps with his belongings, eyes frantic and face apologetic. "Lovi, please—"

"Get out of my face." His voice was cold and hard and knew his eyes matched. He rarely got so angry that he reached this point, voice low and hissing rather than the near yell that was more natural. He almost never used this tone with anyone. But what Feliciano had said... "I owe you nothing right now and need to not be around you. *Move.*"

Lovino felt another presence at his side, too close to be anyone but Antonio. Feliciano's eyes flicked to him but Lovino was beyond patience. "*Now.*"

Feliciano moved and Lovino walked past him like he wasn't there. Antonio didn't say anything as he walked with him towards the largest part of campus, just stayed close to his side. Lovino didn't know what he was thinking and could barely think himself. His feet lead him towards his dorm and no objections were made by Antonio.

It was only when they were in front of Lovino's building did Antonio take his hand, not to halt him but just to hold it. Lovino looked at him, intertwined their fingers, and kept moving.

As they waited for the elevator, Lovino said, "He's overprotective. I didn't mention it before because he thinks I deserve better than you. Like that fucking matters."

Antonio's only response was to squeeze his hand lightly and stand a little closer to him. There were other people waiting now and they all crowded into the elevator. He and Antonio occupied the far corner, no longer touching but definitely in each other's personal space. Lovino waited for his floor a tad impatiently, curving his back as he leaned against the wall and tapping his fingers lightly on the paneling behind him. The damn thing stopped at nearly every floor and Lovino almost ran into the slow opening door as they exited. Antonio went back to holding his hand and Lovino lead them to his dorm room, using his card and code to get into the room.

"Hey, Lovi! I was thinking about having a movie..." Matthew turned from his computer to greet him with a smile only to trail off as he saw Lovino's expression and the fact that he wasn't alone. He wasn't sure what was on his face at the moment, but Matthew, the most wonderful human being that he was, closed his computer and readied his backpack as he said, "I'm suddenly starving. And need to head to the library. See you later! Hi, Antonio."

"Hey, Mattie," Antonio dutifully greeted.

Matthew shot him a significant look as he moved past and Lovino mustered the wherewithal to say quietly, "Thank you."

"Oh, no. I'm just hungry. Also," Matthew paused as he moved out of the room and looked Antonio directly in the eye. "If you fucking hurt him, I will make you *wish* you were dead. Bye!"

Bless you, Mattie, Lovino thought as the door shut behind his friend. He looked at Antonio who dropped his duffle back to the floor and stepped closer to him. He gently removed Lovino's small bag from where it hung from a shoulder and cupped his face. "What does matter?" he asked, picking up the conversation where Lovino had left it.

Lovino knew that his eyes were too honest, too intent as he answered, "This is my choice. And I choose this...and you."

"I don't want you to ignore me, Lovi. Wherever we are," Antonio said and Lovino rested his hands against the other boy's hips.

He couldn't help the soft laugh or shake of his head. "You honestly think I wasn't aware of you the entire time? I knew I wouldn't be able to hide this. And now it doesn't really matter at practice since fucking *everyone* knows."

Antonio's eyes lit up with humor before he asked, "What do you need?"

"You should go," Lovino answered quietly knowing that this would dig his hole deeper, but his hands involuntarily pulled him closer and his eyes flicked down to his mouth.

Antonio's voice slipped into a lower register when he said, "That's not what I asked."

They were a little muddy and definitely sweaty from practice, but that didn't matter now. He would change his sheets after.

"Kiss me," he whispered, meaning *make me forget*.

Antonio obliged him.

Matthew blew out a gusty breath as he walked into the food commons, not hungry but not wanting the quiet of the library and his room was *very* occupied. He had yet to discover his own little study spot on campus and was feeling uninspired when thinking of alternative locations. When in doubt, go where the food is. He was concerned by the lost look on Lovino's face (and the outright worried one on Antonio's) when he had first walked into the room, but the best thing he thought to do was give him privacy. He wasn't sure what could have pulled Lovino back to their room when Antonio had a bedroom of his own, but Matthew wasn't going to question it. ...Well, he would, just not right now.

Feeling like this would be a long night, Matthew got himself a coffee first thing, fixing it with a lot of cream and sugar, before scoping out a table. He was surprised to meet curious green eyes and a wave of welcome from a couple of tables away from the coffee station.

Matthew smiled in greeting and headed over. "Hey, Alistair. What are you doing here?"

They shrugged and gestured to their open laptop and near-by mug of black coffee. Matthew sat as they answered, "I'm usually here this late on weeknights, workin' on stuff while drinkin' endless coffee. There's not much food, but I already ate. How about ye?"

Matthew winced. "My roommate has a guest. I made myself scarce."

Alistair nodded. “Fair. Ye’re roommin’ with Lovino Vargas, yeah?” At Matthew’s wide eyes and nod, they continued with, “Antonio’s one of me best mates. I’m assumin’...”

“Yeah, he’s with Antonio. How did you know we were roommates?” Matthew asked, genuinely curious.

“Tonio’s not one ta keep details ta himself. How’d ye think Gilly knew where ta find Ludwig on Friday?” They sipped at their coffee and Matthew frowned (*They knew about that?*) before shaking his head with a wry smile.

“Small world. Or rather, small campus.” It wasn’t. Campus was huge and there were literally thousands of people who lived here. Then he remembered that Alistair had been long settled before he arrived. Cheeks heating, he said, “Oh, I’m sorry! I’m probably disturbing you.”

Red eyebrows raised slowly as Alistair regarded him. “Mattie, ye don’t know me but I’m a wee bit blunt. If ye were botherin’ me, I would’ve said so.”

Matthew blinked at them before breaking into a smile with a small laugh. “That’s refreshing! I don’t like having to guess if I’m actually welcome somewhere. And I *hate* imposing on people.” Alistair was looking at him strangely, head tilted a little to the side. “What?”

“Yer strange. I like ye.”

“...Thank you?”

They started to smile at him. “Yer not goin’ ta say ye like me back?”

Matthew briefly considered all he knew about this person and said with a sheepish shrug and smile, “I don’t know if I do yet.”

Alistair laughed out loud, smile lines forming at the corners of their eyes, and Matthew liked them then. “Ye’ll do. Noo, do ye actually have work ta do or were ye just escapin’ yer room?”

“Mostly escape. You?”

“Nah, I’m here fer tha coffee at this point. So,” they seemed to study Matthew’s face for a moment. “Yer a first year. How’s tha’ goin’?”

“Better than expected, actually. I got lucky and managed to make some friends. Classes aren’t too hard at the moment, just hockey practice makes it a lot of work. What about you? You’re a junior?”

Alistair nodded. “Aye, workin’ on finishin’ up. This is tha year I do most of tha heavy liftin’ since senior year is fer tyin’ up loose ends. I could graduate early, but I’m on a full ride an’ see no reason ta leave.”

Matthew was surprised and impressed; full rides to this school were *extremely* difficult to get. “What are you studying?”

“Comp sci mostly. You?”

“History and French, but I’m pre-law.” Alistair made a face that all but screamed their opinion on lawyers. “What?”

“No offense, but this country’s legal system is fecked up. It protects tha powerful and oppresses damn near everyone else.”

Matthew didn’t know much about the law yet but, considering the times and history, he believed them. He considered their words carefully before answering. “That seems plausible but how can we expect to dismantle a system without understanding how it works first?”

“But in being part of it, are ye not legitimizin’ tha very thing ye want ta change?”

Matthew wanted to frown but this was the most intellectually stimulating conversation since he’d gotten to school *and* it was coming from someone he had spoken to for less than ten minutes in total. So he started to smile, and continued, “But can’t those who want to reform the system help more people by being in the room where decisions are made? Can’t they help break the system from within it?”

Alistair closed their computer and gave Matthew all their attention. “I stand by tha idea tha’ they are upholding a corrupt system in tha first place.”

“It may be the lesser evil.”

“Ah! But tha problem with choosin’ tha lesser evil is tha’ eventually ye forget it *is* evil.”

“So what would be your solution, then?” Matthew asked, genuinely curious. “Scrap the whole thing?”

“Why not?”

Matthew paused, thinking for a moment before saying, “Well, who would build what came after? Wouldn’t the power disparities reinforced by the current system be reflected in who would create the new system? How do you know that the result wouldn’t be worse than what exists now?”

“Tha’s tha thing: ye can’t just throw out tha legal system without addressin’ an’ correctin’ social inequality.”

“How?”

Their discussion continued, going back and forth for a long time, Matthew curious and Alistair challenging.

Eventually Matthew said with a shrug, “I don’t see why we both can’t be right. Just make sure women of color are leading the revolution; white men have fucked up enough.” Alistair just looked at him for a long moment before shaking their head, barely keeping themselves from laughing. “What?”

“Ye’ll do. An’ I’m laughin’ because Gilly has no clue about ye yet. Not really.”

Matthew tensed, mentally caught flat-footed. “What about Gilbert?” His voice had been too high and reedy in tone and Alistair grinned at him. It took two seconds for Matthew to realize what his reaction would mean to them. He couldn’t help the blush and groaned as he put his face in his hands. “Was I *that* obvious on Saturday?”

“Yes,” they said simply. “Don’t fret; he was worse.”

Matthew froze and lifted his head slowly from his hands to look at them. “What did you say?”

They frowned at him. “Did ye not know? He was all but leerin’ at ye.”

“I was a mess.” Matthew said automatically.

“He didn’t see it tha’ way.”

Matthew stared incomprehensively at them for a long moment before sipping from his mug of coffee and grimacing at the cold sludge it had become. Alistair just watch his reactions. He tried again, tiring of the uncertainty, “What does he want from me, Alistair?”

They shrugged but their eyes narrowed as they assessed him. “He’s not sure yet, but me best guess is everythin’.”

Matthew leaned back in his chair, stunned. “*Why?*”

“Why not?” Matthew lowered his eyes as his cheeks heated again but said nothing. At length, they asked, “Has no one ever wanted ye?”

Matthew flinched and Alistair cursed. “I’m sorry. Tha’ was a shite thing ta ask.”

He managed to smile and it felt bittersweet. “It was; but it’s also true outside of hockey.”

Seconds passed and Matthew considered making excuses and leaving but Alistair said, “On Saturday, Gilly told ye ta remember something. What was it?”

Matthew finally looked up to meet their eyes and found their expression serious. He said, “He had given me his number and said to text him if I needed a sparring partner or wanted to talk.”

Alistair seemed to roll this information around in their head. “Text him tomorrow. It doesn’t need ta be anythin’ special, but just start talkin’. If ye think ye still like him after a couple of days, ask him about tha sparring partner thing.”

He was back to being stunned. “Why are you telling me this?”

Alistair smiled wryly. “Because I think ye would be good fer him. And I like ye.” They paused for a second then grinned. “An’ I can hold it over him forever if this works out.”

Matthew tentatively smiled back. ‘I like you, too.’

“Because I’m helping ye wit him?”

“No. I decided I liked you the first time you laughed.”

They stared at him like he was the strangest thing they had ever seen before shaking their head and laughing once more. “He has *no idea*. Noo! We should go. Looks like their closin’ down tha commons.”

Matthew startled and looked around to see workers putting up chairs on the other side of the room. Only he, Alistair, and one girl who seemed engrossed in writing something with headphones in place were the only students left. He’d been here for close to two hours. “I didn’t realize that much time had passed.”

“Thank ye.” Matthew looked quizzically at them and Alistair shrugged. “Means ye had good company.”

Matthew stood and gathered his things while Alistair did the same. “You are also strange.”

They nodded sagely, “Part of me charm.”

They walked together over to the dish collection area and then out together. Matthew checked his phone and saw that Lovino had texted him about 15 minutes prior.

Lovi: he’s gone thanks for that

“Looks like it’s safe to go home.”

Alistair shot him a pitying look. “Good luck wit tha’. I’m headin’ this way.” They nodded in the opposite direction of where Matthew was going. There was only one dorm in that direction, and it was the one taken up by upper-year honors students who applied to live there.

“Okay. I’ll see you around?”

Alistair smiled a little and shook their head. “Yeah, ye will. If ye find ye need to get away again, I’m usually at that table in tha evenings. I’m not always good company, but tha’ seat is open ta ye.”

Matthew couldn’t help grinning at (who he hoped was) his new friend. “I’ll keep that in mind. Good night!”

“Night, Mattie.” Matthew turned towards his dorm, head spinning with their conversation and skin buzzing at the knowledge that Gilbert was actually interested in him. He didn’t know the boy, but he couldn’t help but want to, not after every time they interacted left Matthew tongue-tied and dizzy with an unfamiliar pull in his gut.

His thoughts shifted to Lovino as he rode the elevator and walked down the corridor to his room. He opened the door with trepidation, finding Lovino running a towel over wet hair.

The room was cool, the window open, and smelled of air freshener. Matthew quite consciously ignored those observations to ask, "You want to talk?"

Lovino looked at him, eyes tired but somehow at peace, before shrugging. "Not much to say. Feli crossed a line, our coach doesn't care if we're fucking, and Antonio still...is Antonio."

Matthew looked over him and noticed two things: there was yet another obvious love bite on his neck and that his friend was fragile around the edges of his expression. Thinking that Lovino would tell him something if he needed to, Matthew only asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, but...thanks. Really." Lovino said quietly, face lightly reddening as he looked away. "Maybe distract me?"

"Hmm," Matthew hummed as he put his stuff down and sat in his desk chair. He wanted to bring up movie night, but wasn't sure how Lovino would feel about it now that something had happened between him and Felicino. Gilbert had proved a welcome distraction on Saturday; maybe he and Alistair would work again. "I think I made a new friend."

Gilbert frowned at the messages he just received from Alistair, not understanding the meaning and a little disconcerted by them. The first was a familiar gif of an older woman saying, "Honey, you've got a big storm coming." The next was just the words *you're welcome*.

Gilbert: You want to explain that?

Scottie: Lol no

Scottie: You'll thank me later.

Gilbert: I hate you

Scottie: lol

So *fucking* contrary.

Gilbert: can I get a hint?

Scottie: Blue-eyed devil.

Gilbert: Francis?

Scottie: I'm telling him you said that.

Gilbert: he would be honored

Gilbert: c'mon Scottie don't leave me hanging!

Scottie: I can't decide if he's a baby animal that needs protecting or a menace to society.

Francis was *definitely* a menace so... Gilbert froze, eyes wide.

Gilbert: Mattie?

Alistair didn't answer for five minutes and Gilbert lost his patience.

Gilbert: what happened? What did he do to make you say that?

Scottie: made me like him

Gilbert: what

Scottie: ;)

Gilbert: I thought you only liked women

Gilbert: honestly wtf

Gilbert: Alistair!

Scottie: lol

Insufferable.

Gilbert: you're not my best friend anymore Francis is

Scottie: oh ffs

Scottie: I got him to text you tomorrow

Scottie: because he LIKES you, you ungrateful child

Gilbert: I take back everything I said you're the best and I love you

Scottie: ugh

Gilbert: thank you!

Scottie: Don't fuck it up.

Gilbert: wait, how do you know?

Scottie: *rolls eyes*

Gilbert: did he tell you?

Scottie: Goodnight, Gilbert.

Damn. Looks like he had to wait until tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm an awful person. I was going to wait and post this when the next chapter was finished, but I got caught in a blizzard, found out my thesis was fucking preempted (I'm screwed), and thought that life is too short.

In another version of this chapter, Alistair calls Matthew "the most dangerous boy they had ever met." That's because he is too damn likable. Anyway, they have joined the MWDS. In case you were wondering, Alistair was amused when talking to Mathew because they know that he will wreck Gilbert (in a good way) and find it amusing. If you're wondering why Gilbert has Alistair saved as both "D" and "Scottie" in his phone, the Horsemen* group chat is on an app while the stuff here was just SMS.

Also, I apologize to anyone who is actually Scottish. I have encountered Scottish twitter and discovered I don't understand your dialect. Alistair's been in the US a while, so hat explains it here. I have no justification for my other stories.

Chapter title is from Suzanne Vega's "Caramel." "It won't do to dream of caramel, to think of cinnamon, and long for you."

Chapter 8: This Could Be

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mattie: Hey

Gilbert hadn't been anxiously checking his phone all day for this one text. No, he had just been...very conscious of the time today. And there certainly weren't butterflies in his stomach. He was the epitome of cool.

Gilbert: hey

Shit. Too cool. He had to know he was interested!

Gilbert: how are you?

That was good. Inviting without being over-eager.

Matthew took a few minutes to write a response, but Gilbert saw that he had been typing on and off for most of that time. Looks like he wasn't the only one agonizing over what to say; it was comforting.

Mattie: I'm okay, just getting out of my lit class. You?

Gilbert: ngl dying a little. I'm drafting a project in the architecture building and I've been staring at it so long the lines are starting to blur.

Mattie: I have a suggestion and it's a little out there but...

Mattie: take a break?

Gilbert: I really want to but the proposal is due Friday and I have to work tomorrow afternoon so *shrug*

Mattie: Fair but how much can you get done if you can't see the lines anymore

Gilbert smiled. Then an idea occurred. *Oh, why not?*

Gilbert: you're not wrong

Gilbert: maybe a coffee break...

Gilbert: want to take it with me?

Mattie: for real?

Mattie: I mean yes

Mattie: where should I meet you?

Gilbert was imagining the blush on his face and his smile widened.

Gilbert: are you close to the engineering building?

Mattie: ...which one is that?

Gilbert: the dull grey building about midway through campus

Mattie: um

Gilbert: in front there are usually a bunch of students who look like zombies and are holding coffee cups like it's their lifeline

Mattie: oh that one

Mattie: on my way

Mattie: I'll be amidst the zombie horde out front

Gilbert was grinning now as he started packing up his things. He was going to come back and work on the assignment probably within an hour, but it was common courtesy to leave a workstation clear when you were going to be gone for that long. Well, it was courtesy any time outside of finals; at that point it was everyone for themselves.

He got a few side-eyes on his way out from some of the older students, people Gilbert had seen around enough to nod in greeting but they never had spoken, but he paid them no mind as he put on the sunglasses he had to wear to protect his sensitive eyes (even on with the cloudy weather) and walked out of the work space. He was only a two-minute walk away from the engineering building, but it felt longer for the nervous excitement he felt in meeting Matthew for something as simple as coffee. Maybe he should have waited? But Matthew had said yes, even seemed happy to meet him.

Matthew was waiting to the side of the sidewalk outside of the engineering building, rocking backwards on his heels a little and fidgeting with his phone. He was dressed as Gilbert usually saw him, in loose jeans and a t-shirt, hoodie held in the hand that didn't have his phone, and hair swept up to be out of his face in a messy but effective bun. He was an unassuming figure and people seemed to look over him. In the handful of seconds Gilbert had to observe him as he approached, Matthew moved easily out of the way of two people moving past him. That was odd, considering all it had taken was one glance at the boy for Gilbert to be arrested by his looks.

In fact, Gilbert was struck once again with the thought *holy shit, he's gorgeous* when Matthew's eyes found him and he grinned in greeting, cheeks coloring a little. He didn't fight the automatic response of smiling back. "Hey, Mattie."

"Hi, Gil." Neither said anything for a beat, just looking at each other, before Matthew ducked his head adorably. "Um, where are we getting coffee?"

“In here,” Gilbert said, moving towards the building’s entrance. “There’s a coffee shop inside. I call it the engineering building, but it’s actually shared with the physics and comp sci departments. It was definitely some kind of evil genius who decided to put a continuous source of caffeine in the building with all of us working here constantly.”

Matthew walked with him as they made their way through the building, looking around a little. “You’re an engineering major?”

“Unfortunately.” When Matthew looked at him quizzically, he winced. “It was a big lift my first couple of years. I spent more time than was pretty sleep-deprived and over-caffeinated in this place. What about you? West mentioned a few things in passing about what you study.”

“History and French. I’m technically pre-law but they don’t let you do anything with that first semester.”

“Why law?” Gilbert asked as they got in line to order. There were a small number of tables in the café proper, but there were enough places in the surrounding area that weren’t for quiet study where they could sit.

“It seems right, I guess. It has a little to do with my brother, too.”

“Older or younger?”

Matthew shook his head. “We’re twins. He’s going into business and is one of the most ruthless, unethical people I know. I thought it would be great to be in a job that could hold people like him accountable for their actions.” Gilbert gave him look. “What?”

“Just interesting. It’s just most people that I’ve met say it’s for the money or because their parents went into it.”

He watched Matthew frown and think about what he would say next. He didn’t rush to answer and seemed to choose his words carefully as he said, “I don’t see the point in picking a profession just because your parents did it and there are things more important to me than money. As long as I have enough to pay my bills and eat, I think I’ll be okay.”

So he didn’t grow up with money. It wasn’t that Gilbert thought that all rich kids were consumed with greed but there was a certain...standard of living those he’d met on campus seemed accustomed to that struck him as ridiculous at times. “I understand that. I much rather enjoy what I do than pick the most lucrative job.”

“What about you? Ludwig mentioned something about blowing things up...” The tease in his voice and expression were obvious and Gilbert let out a short laugh.

“If only it were that simple. Yes, I want to go into demolitions but there’s both an art and a science to controlled chaos. And I’ve always enjoyed destruction; there’s something cathartic about it.” Matthew was looking at him with a question in his eyes and Gilbert realized that they were standing pretty close together... and that it was their turn to order. “Do you know what you want, Mattie?”

“Pretty sure,” he answered simply, absentmindedly. Gilbert raised his eyebrows at him to prompt his order and Matthew blinked, looked at the bored cashier, and blushed. “Um, sorry. A small...maple latte, please?”

Gilbert immediately grimaced, but he ordered without missing a beat, “Double shot for me, thanks.” He saw Matthew wrinkle his nose as he started taking his backpack off, presumably to get his money. Gilbert easily reached into his back pocket and pulled out a ten from his wallet.

“Gil, you don’t—“

“I want to.”

“Oh. Okay.” Matthew stepped to the side to wait for their drinks. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He stepped to the side after getting his change and noticed someone getting up from one of the tables in the crowded area. He nodded over and said to Matthew. “Can you snag that table for us? It’s hard to find seating here.”

“Sure.” Matthew went to secure the table and Gilbert stood by for the drinks. The situation gave Gilbert a couple of minutes to try to not question his decision to ask Matthew to coffee already and he found himself fidgeting anxiously with the sunglasses. Sure, he had firmly taken the route of pursuing him, but, now that he wasn’t consumed with anticipation, doubt started to creep in. He didn’t want to come off as predatory, not in a bad way. Gilbert didn’t have a subtle bone in his body and he generally had problems articulating non-technical thoughts. The only one of his close friends less diplomatic than him was Alistair, but that was a really low bar. There was a reason they were given the names War and Death, after all. And —

The drinks were announced and Gilbert had run out of time to overthink this. He grabbed them and started weaving through the tables to get to Matthew. The freshman looked up from his phone at Gilbert’s approach and smiled at him, the expression genuine and lighting up his whole face.

His breath did not catch, thank you very much.

“Thanks.” Matthew said as Gilbert sat across from him. Gilbert reached out to give him the syrup that he called coffee and Matthew met him, their fingers brushing. He was an adult, goddammit. He shouldn’t be so aware of such a small amount of contact.

“No problem. I’ve got to ask though; you really can drink that? I mean, isn’t it too sweet?”

Matthew shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never had it before but I generally like maple flavored things. Why? Do you not like sweet things, Gil?”

Genuine curiosity was in eyes and Gilbert was distracted by the color of them, not really thinking about his answer. “It depends. A lot of American desserts are too much for me, so I’ve learned to avoid almost anything labeled sweet here.”

“Right, Ludwig did mention that you moved here when you were kids. You didn’t like the sweets even then?”

He didn’t miss casual mention of the fact that he was friends with Gilbert’s brother, but there wasn’t any weight to that statement. If it didn’t seem weird to Matthew that he was getting coffee with him while still being friends with Ludwig, Gilbert certainly wasn’t going to make a fuss of it. “Well, sure, but I was a kid then and a...mischievous one at that. I did grow out of it, though.”

Matthew raised his eyebrows and curled his lips a little. “That’s an interesting way to describe yourself...”

Gilbert smirked. “I guess you could say I got into a bit of trouble now and again.”

Matthew laughed and it was soft, understated thing. “All my illusions of you, shattered,” he teased before taking a sip of his coffee and wincing a little. At Gilbert’s expectant expression, he continued, “Okay, it’s a little much, even for me. Still, no way I would ever just order espresso shots.”

Gilbert shrugged and, thinking that the shots would no longer scald him, knocked them back easily. The espresso in the engineering building was not worth savoring. He looked at Matthew when he was done and saw poorly concealed horror on his face. Gilbert answered it with a smile. “I don’t even really taste them anymore. That, and I’ve built up a tolerance to caffeine that isn’t quite to Alistair’s level of dependence but is mildly worrying.”

Matthew shook his head at him. “I take it you have long days?”

“Yeah, but I think I’m in the majority on that. I have class, work, and club stuff, so it’s enough to keep me running around, especially if I want to actually see my friends or family without a textbook between us.”

Matthew hummed a little in acknowledgement, leaning forward. “I get it. Where do you work?”

“Local community center. I teach self-defense sometimes, but mostly I help with teaching the martial arts classes a couple times a week.”

Matthew blinked at the information but then grinned at him. “Oh. That’s great, Gil! Do you have a favorite class to teach? Is it only MMA?”

Gilbert was surprised then immediately confused over his own reaction. He managed to answer, “It’s not just MMA, since I’m mostly assisting with other classes and I’m still pretty young to have a whole class to myself all the time. And...I think the one for kids. They’re always willing to try new things, and a lot of them haven’t experienced enough fear in their life to be cautious or self-conscious. It’s hard to teach those classes, since they require a lot of supervision if we don’t want them to overdo it, but it’s probably still my favorite.”

Gilbert smiled absently at that, remembering the class he had helped with the week before. The kids were elementary aged, the parents either hanging about close to the classroom or

elsewhere for the duration. None of them hesitated to hold back in their exclamations when they punched or kicked, just having fun. Gilbert had joked with them about being quiet “ninjas” when the center director poked her head in to silently signal that they needed to quiet down (which happened every other week), which resulted in a bunch of children giggling as they practiced “sneaking” around.

“You sound like you really enjoy it,” Matthew said, still smiling and focused on him in a way that was wonderful if inexplicably unbalancing. Then it hit him.

Matthew was *listening* to him. Not just waiting to jump in or just filing information or half looking at his phone. No, he was genuinely interested in and cared about hearing Gilbert’s answer.

When Alistair had sounded surprised that Matthew meant that he truly was happy to meet them a few days ago, Gilbert didn’t understand. Now, he did.

It was...really nice, actually. Being listened to.

“Um, yeah.” Gilbert said, in response, at a loss what to do with this new information. Well, that was a lie. He knew what to do—return the favor. Gilbert cleared his throat and had to look away from Matthew for a moment, feeling the slightest flush crawl up his neck. “What about you, Mattie? What do your days look like?”

Gilbert was pretty when he blushed.

That was a startling observation for Matthew to make and he dwelled on it in the back of his mind as they continued talking. He didn’t usually notice that detail with people, let alone feel any desire to watch it happen again. He also never feels the urge to try to hold the hand of whomever he’s getting coffee with.

Then again, he’s never been on a date before.

Not that this is a date, of course. It was just coffee between two people getting to know each other.

Right?

Anyway.

The topic changed as it is wont to do in good conversations and Matthew noticed that Gilbert really did seem interested in him. Alistair had told him as much, but there was a difference between hearing the impossible and having it actually happen. He had gotten so used to having people look past him off the ice that this kind of sustained and engaged attention was new...well, new to university. Lovino, Alistair, and now Gilbert had all made him feel... here?

That was the wrong word, but how else could he describe how important being seen was to someone who had never been before?

And it felt like he had never he had been seen quite like this, not by someone he was romantically interested in. It's not that the interactions with friends weren't important, but this moment with Gilbert was something different. He never found himself having to concentrate on not letting his eyes wander to the muscles in Lovino's arms as he gestured or making sure he never stared too long at Alistair's mouth. It's not like Gilbert anything but a man, yet Matthew found himself entranced in a way he wasn't sure he liked yet.

Of all the things that Matthew worked to keep out of his head as they talked, the most distracting was how a little increased blood flow could make Matthew look at Gilbert (who was strikingly handsome and so masculine that Matthew had never been more aware just how gay he was—I mean goddamn) and immediately think *pretty*. It was like Michelangelo's *David* had suddenly flushed at scholar's commentary—

Okay, he needed to calm down. No need to get poetic over something Matthew did more often than he would like.

And *yet*.

Matthew worked hard at making sure his internal struggles stayed invisible as they spoke. He was relatively sure of his success until Gilbert suddenly scowled at him. Since Matthew had been half preoccupied with memorizing the exact curve of his lower lip (*why why why why!*), it had taken him aback and, for a wild second, made him fear that Gilbert had somehow sensed his thoughts. He stopped midway into relaying why the fourth season of *Supernatural* was the best one to ask, "Uh, is something wrong?"

Gilbert blinked and softened his expression. It was only as he focused back on Matthew that he realized that Gilbert had frowning at something behind him rather than at Matthew himself. "Sorry. It's just...have you noticed other people staring at you?"

Matthew couldn't help a small, surprised laugh at that ridiculous question. "Gil, I haven't noticed anything beyond—" *you* was how that sentence ended, but Matthew caught himself before he verbalized that way-too-true statement. Gilbert raised his eyebrows at that and had a knowing glint to his expression that said he knew *exactly* where he was going with that. It was only confirmed as he smirked a little at Matthew's instant blush. He cleared his throat desperately and pushed on, looking away from Gilbert now. "Um, I mean, no. And no one ever looks at me."

Shit, I shouldn't have said that.

"I do." Matthew swore his heart stuttered in his chest as the rest of his body tensed. When nothing followed that statement for two seconds, Matthew tentatively lifted his gaze to see nothing but sincerity on Gilbert's face, all hints of arrogant teasing gone.

Matthew reflexively licked his lips, suddenly nervous, and started, "I—"

"Excuse me," a polite voice interrupted, startling Matthew out of the bubble his mind had created around him and Gilbert. He straightened from the slight slouch over the table he had naturally assumed while talking comfortably and look towards the person who had spoken.

A blond young woman was standing all but next to the table, dressed in a way that stood out as polished in the mass of sweatshirt-clad bodies and staring, surprisingly, at Matthew. He would have expected people in this building to address Gilbert, not him. He tried to keep his brow from furrowing rudely as he answered, “Yes?”

She smiled kindly and said, “I’m sorry to interrupt, Gilbert,” she glanced at him in acknowledgement but then immediately turned back to Matthew, “but there was something I wanted to ask you. Do you play ice hockey, by chance?”

Matthew didn’t try to stop the confused frown now. “Yes...?”

“Patricia,” Gilbert said warily, like he wasn’t sure if he liked where this was going. “What’s this about?”

She blinked large brown eyes at him before saying, “The video, of course.” A lead ball formed in Matthew’s stomach as she continued to him now. “I wanted to confirm that it was you in the video that was posted on Monday, since the undergrads,” she gestured behind her and Matthew noticed a small group of people watching them with great interest, “were too nervous to come over and ask directly.”

Matthew *felt* pale. “You...recognize me? From that?” he asked, voice getting softer with each word. Matthew *hated* that the one-on-one match had been recorded, detested the fact that hundreds of people saw him close to his most childish, and loathed the idea of them knowing *why* he was angry. And, while he knew that he had been running out of options to get Matthias and the team to respect him, he was still ashamed of his behavior.

“Yes, of course! I noticed your voice first, but it was easy enough.” Matthew didn’t make a distressed sound, but it was an effort. He felt himself slouching as she kept speaking. “I’m the TA for the sports physics course and one of the students shared the video with the rest of the class. Thanks to you, we actually had an engaging discussion about—“

“Patricia,” Gilbert said, his tone hard now and commanding in a way that had both Patricia and Matthew looking at him without thought. He was looking at Matthew, assessing, as he continued, “You *were* interrupting us.”

She frowned a little in confusion, then looked between them once more before understanding bloomed on her face. “Oh! I didn’t realize this was—anyway! Just wanted to say that we all thought you were quite impressive and to thank you for belatedly making my class planning easier. Take care!”

“Thanks,” he replied weakly as she turned towards the other students. Patricia seemed nice enough, but her words left Matthew feeling like he was being constantly watched.

“Mattie,” Gilbert said gently and Matthew looked back to find his expression...tentative?
“Do you want to leave?”

Matthew winced. “Yeah. Um, sorry.”

“Then let’s go.” Gilbert stood and Matthew hurried to follow him, keeping his head down and very carefully not looking at anyone. He didn’t want to see if anyone was looking back.

Matthew felt awful, realizing that it was his fault their...meeting had turned sour. He thought it was going so well! Now, what did Gilbert think? The video hadn’t come up in however long they had been talking...shit, he needed to check the time.

It would be shitty to be late meeting Ludwig because he had been with his brother...kind of behind his back. This wasn’t a date, so Matthew didn’t feel the need to tell Ludwig. *If Gilbert ever asks me out, then I’ll talk to Ludwig. Until then, I’ve got nothing to go on, really.*

“Hey.” Matthew looked over to Gilbert and saw concern on his face. Rather, he thought he did considering his sunglasses. “You okay?”

“...I’m sorry about that,” Matthew replied softly, unwilling to answer his actual question honestly. “I didn’t know that video was being taken and I’m not exactly proud of how I acted.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Gilbert said to him as they walked outside and were faced with an awkward moment of *do we split up now or keep talking?* “You have a minute?”

Matthew checked the time on his phone and saw that he still had a half hour until he had to meet Ludwig. “Yeah. About fifteen until I have to head to a meeting.” *With Ludwig.* Gilbert probably knew this, but he didn’t comment on it.

“Walk with me?” Matthew was surprised and confused at why Gilbert still wanted to be around him, but wasn’t stupid enough to question it out loud. He nodded and Gilbert grinned at him, stunning Matthew for a split second. He turned down one of the concrete pathways and Matthew was helpless to do anything but follow.

Gilbert continued. “I understand if you don’t want to talk about it, but I’m sorry. I didn’t know that was taken without your permission.”

“Thanks. I haven’t really talked about it with anyone. The video, I mean. I talked to my partner about the match beforehand to warn him, but haven’t said much about the video.”

There was an odd stiffness to Gilbert’s posture then. “...Your partner?”

“Yes, Nate. He was the one on the video who explained why I was angry. That’s part of the reason why I...” Matthew trailed off as his mind worked through why that would be a question. Then he felt really stupid and frantically tried to fix it. “Oh! You meant—no! Not like that! Nate’s just who I pair up the most with on my team. I’m not dating anyone.”

“Oh. That’s good.” There was a beat surprised silence of them looking at each other after that. Then they both looked away and Matthew could see another blush grace Gilbert’s cheeks. *Yep, still distracting.* Gilbert cleared his throat and said, “You were saying something? About why you...?”

Matthew walked the conversation back thirty seconds in his head to remember where they were. “Right. It’s kinda embarrassing, having hundreds of people I don’t know aware of just how my teammates saw me as inadequate. I’m...not sure how to be okay with that.”

“Shit. I can see how you would feel that way.” Gilbert cringed out of the corner of his eye. “And you don’t have to be okay with it, Mattie. That really fucking sucks; you don’t have to act like it doesn’t.”

He gets it. Gilbert’s reaction made Matthew comfortable enough to continue. “I...I’m also not proud of how I behaved. I was so angry that I was foolish and reckless in a way that’s difficult to watch. I had my reasons, but knowing that a bunch of people saw me like that...”

Gilbert was quiet for a moment and Matthew didn’t try to fill the silence, caught up in his own feelings. Eventually, he said, “I’m really sorry that you have to deal with that, Matthew. I can’t understand completely, but I get why you’re upset. If it helps, I could tell you how I and likely other people saw that moment?” When Matthew didn’t say anything, Gilbert hedged with, “I could also say nothing at all and change the subject. Or I can just listen if you want to say more on it. It’s your choice. I want to help, if I can.”

Matthew turned to stare at Gilbert, startled over the offer. *My choice.* No one had ever given him a choice like that before. He met Matthew’s gaze, and it felt steady and searching, utterly empathetic and *oh god, who is this guy? How is he like this?* “Thank you,” he managed before deciding what he wanted to hear. “W-what did you see?”

“Someone who was highly capable, dealing with senseless cruelty effectively and efficiently,” he answered automatically, like he had been waiting to say this and had thought through his words. “Hearing what your teammates had said about you and done to you only made me angry on your behalf and increase my respect for you for dealing with it the way you did. And, if I’m being really honest,” Gilbert smirked here, “I saw someone who was *incredibly* attractive.”

It was the last thing Matthew expected to hear. He was already thrown by how Gilbert described his reactions, so far from what Matthew had imagined people thought of him after watching the video. But hearing Gilbert, the most attractive person Matthew had ever *seen*, say that...

Matthew’s brain couldn’t process it. It...broke for a second.

He stopped walking, eyes wide and lips parted. Gilbert paused immediately, coming to stand in front of him with sudden anxiety on his face. God, but he wished he could see Gilbert’s eyes! They were lucky it was between normal class times; otherwise the walkway would have been flooded with students who would have witnessed Matthew Williams being utterly astounded at having Gilbert Beilschmidt call him attractive at any point in his life.

Gilbert seemed to hold Matthew’s gaze, voice a subtle mix of anxiety and confusion. “Mattie...was that not—“

“You. You thought that I was...?” Matthew stuttered out, slightly incoherent. “But *you* are and I’m just—What?”

Understanding appeared on Gilbert's face, though the confusion never quite cleared. He stepped a little closer to Matthew and the part of his brain that had been rebooting crashed again. He said slowly, in a low tone that triggered some instinct that was close to but so different from a fight or flight response, "You are *remarkably* attractive, Matthew."

He couldn't think. He couldn't reason through anything for an eternal second as he continued staring at Gilbert, a paradigm shifting in his head.

Unfortunately, he could talk, and his brain, so overwhelmed with the firsthand knowledge that Gilbert was attracted to him, wanted time to process this conversation alone. "I have to go," he blurted, stepping back from the junior. He may have been shaking, but he couldn't think of anything beyond Gilbert's words, Gilbert's sincere expression, Gilbert himself. "Meet Ludwig. We're studying in the library soon."

Gilbert tensed and drew himself back as his expression became visibly guarded. "Of course."

That was enough to get some part of Matthew up and running, the part that made sure Gilbert wanted to see him again. "But!" Matthew started, not really knowing what he was going to say and taking a half step towards the other boy. "Thank you, for the coffee. And I-I liked this. A lot."

Something in Gilbert softened and Matthew counted that as a win. "Me, too. I'm happy we did this."

"Yeah." Matthew smiled wide at him as his brain shouted, *compliment him!* "You're also really pretty."

Not like that! Gilbert was apparently speechless at that and this seemed like a good time to run. "Okay, bye!"

Matthew didn't literally run from him, but he did walk at a rather fast clip away from Gilbert and back towards the library. Gilbert didn't shout anything to him as he beat a hasty retreat. The adrenaline had him maintaining the pace all the way to the library, not even pausing to take out his phone to listen to music. The angst in his head over what just happened was more than enough to occupy him.

He managed to pull himself together enough to get through the study session with Ludwig, having set their movie night for a week from now, to account for everyone's schedules and making sure they all had completed enough work ahead of time to really enjoy it. If anything about him was off, Ludwig didn't comment on it.

When they parted for the evening after taking the time to hang out in the student center after finishing their work a bit earlier than expected, Matthew finally allowed himself to look at his phone where he knew at least one text message awaited him.

Gilbert: Am not.

Matthew, for all that he was a little mortified for having said it in the moment, smiled to himself.

Matthew: Are too

Matthew: Especially when you blush

Scottie: what did you do

Gilbert: ???

Scottie: Mattie wouldn't say anything about texting you

Scottie: he just said that he talked to you before looking away and turning red

Gilbert: wait, you're with him now?

Scottie: focus, Gilbert

Scottie: I'm invested. Give me what I want.

Gilbert: fuckin hell

Gilbert: we had coffee

Scottie: you weren't kidding about going after him

Scottie: and???

Gilbert: it was good. really good

Gilbert: so you're with him now?

Scottie: g2g it's rude to text when I talking to someone

Gilbert: I fucking hate you

Scottie: ly2 *wink*

Scottie: don't act like you haven't been texting him this entire time

Gilbert: *exasperation* *rolls eyes* *flips tables*

Scottie: seems like an over reaction

Gilbert: can I never get a straight answer out of you?

Scottie: lol

Scottie: I told you I like him. We're friends

Gilbert: well at least I know he has good taste

It was after practice on Thursday night that Lovino had decided enough was enough and went to settle things with Feliciano. He could give everyone the cold shoulder indefinitely if he was pissed at them...with the notable and irritating exception of his little brother. It just didn't feel right and, with their away game happening tomorrow, Lovino wanted this dealt with before they were trapped in a bus with their entire team.

Antonio came up to him as their team started to disperse and Lovino said immediately to preempt him, "I have to talk to Feli. I'll see you tomorrow?"

If Antonio was surprised, he didn't show it. "Sure, Lovi. Rest well." Then, because now that the team knew they were sleeping together and there was no real need for secrecy, Antonio kissed his temple and turned away, jogging to catch up with his housemates who were already halfway across the field. That little sign of affection was unbalancing and Lovino couldn't help the small curve of his lips at the action. His smile, if one could call it that, faded as his eyes sought Feliciano, who was already heading towards their dorm.

Lovino took a fortifying breath, picked up his belongings, and started after him, increasing his pace so that he caught up to him in about a minute. Feliciano had given up on trying to talk to Lovino yesterday when he had thrown him a truly vile glare at the attempt, so he was listening to music when Lovino reached him.

He must have seen him out of his peripheral vision, because Feliciano startled and looked at Lovino, surprised. When he took out his headphones, Lovino started with a disgruntled. "Hey."

"Lovi..." Feliciano hedged, remorse on his face and Lovino sighed.

"I don't want to drag this out. What you said was fucked up—"

"Ve, I know and I didn't---"

"Stop and let me finish, dammit." Lovino glared at him a little and, for once, his brother did. He saw that a few of their teammates were in earshot, so he switched to Italian. *"It was a shitty thing to say when you know this is already going to be difficult. It's my choice and you need to respect that, not sabotage something I actually worked really fucking hard to get in the first place."*

"That being said...I know you mean well and are really just concerned." Feliciano nodded quickly in response, but stayed quiet. *"As long as you don't make things harder and stop glaring at him, then I guess I forgive you."*

Feliciano damn near tackled him as he seized Lovino in a hug. *"Ve, I promise! I'm sorry, Lovi. I know you like him and I really only want the best for you, but I shouldn't have done that. I'll make it up to you!"*

Lovino sighed again and said, *"Yes, yes, now get off me. You're sweaty and gross."*

He pulled away and smiled wide at Lovino. *"You're not any better!"*

"Doesn't make it okay, Feli." Lovino rolled his eyes. *"Anyway, since Mattie didn't have a chance to see you and has been preoccupied with a certain junior—"*

"Really!" Feliciano all but shouted in English.

Lovino shushed him. *"Keep your voice down, dammit. As I was saying—"*

"Mattie's dating Gilbert?"

"Not quite. They're talking and apparently pretty open about the fact they like each other—"

"Get. It. Mattie!" Feliciano said, snapping at each word before giggling.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, pull yourself together. *Anyway*, Matthew managed to get a certain study partner of his—"

"Ludwig!" Feliciano exclaimed before looking around.

"Do you have no sense of discretion? *Yes*, Ludwig agreed to come by our room next week for a movie night which we assume you're coming to."

"Of course!"

"Well, it's happening Wednesday night." Feliciano pouted. "What is it now?"

"That's so far away." Lovino rolled his eyes as they moved into the building.

"Take it up with Matthew. He wants us to be responsible and be ahead on our work or some shit before having anyone over."

Feliciano scrunched up his nose in a show of disgust and exasperation as they got into the elevator, full of other people as usual. "Mattie needs to loosen up. No, actually; he needs to get laid."

Lovino wasn't so sure since he was half convinced the kid was ace, but agreed with the overall sentiment. Several people looked askance at them but Lovino tried to ignore them. "He does need to relax. Maybe having the hockey thing settled and being social will help."

Gilbert: so...

Gilbert: have you thought anymore about finding a sparring partner?

Matthew: a little...

Matthew: I don't know if I should get one honestly

Matthew: I can't go work out immediately after practice every Saturday I would die

Gilbert: we do reserve the room two more times a week you know

Gilbert: Tuesday and Thursday evenings

Matthew: I could probably make it on Thursday

Matthew: but I'm really not sure about scheduling more workouts

Matthew: and I'll have games a couple of Thursday nights once the season starts

Gilbert: maybe swing by this Thursday, no strings attached?

Gilbert: then if you think it would be too much I won't mention it again

Matthew: okay, that sounds good

Matthew: I just really don't want to leave someone in the lurch

Matthew: regular workout clothes okay?

Gilbert: yeah, most people wear sweatpants and a t-shirt

Gilbert: when does your season start, btw

Matthew: two weeks from now

Matthew: I'm trying to get ahead on my work so I won't drown once it starts

Gilbert: home or away?

Matthew: home but the rink we use is off campus

Matthew: if you can, would you come?

Matthew: only if you want to, I mean

Matthew: it's okay if you don't!

Matthew: I mean I probably won't play much anyway so there's really no need

Gilbert: Mattie calm down I wasn't ignoring you

Gilbert: I had to deal with someone being stupid

Gilbert: yes, I'll go to your game. I don't work Friday nights

Matthew: okay. That's cool

Matthew: thanks

Gilbert: don't worry about it

Gilbert: what are you doing tonight?

Gilbert: on one of you last weekend nights before the season

Matthew: studying

Gilbert: what

Gilbert: Mattie it's Friday

Matthew: I'm aware of that, Gil

Matthew: I told you I want to get ahead

Matthew: I'm going to stop answering now

Gilbert: *sad*

Matthew: don't do that

Matthew: you know you're distracting

Gilbert: am I now (ಠ_ಠ)

Matthew: *distracting ME

Gilbert: sure. Whatever you say *wink*

Matthew: goodnight Gilbert

Gilbert: night Mattie

Lovino could admit that Feliciano was trying to make it up to him. He had done as he said and stopped glaring at their team captain whenever they were in the same vicinity. Considering that they had an away game last night, it couldn't have happened a moment too soon.

Traveling for the game was...interesting. Sure, Coach didn't care that they were fucking, but did Antonio really have to touch him constantly? It wasn't like he had tried for anything sexual in front of people (which was good because Lovino would have lost his shit), but he was absently affectionate. It was almost like he didn't notice that he was reaching for Lovino's hand or putting an arm around him in the middle of conversations with other team members while they were on the bus.

Then there was that one time he literally pulled Lovino *into his lap* while waiting for the game to start *in the locker room*. They had both been completely dressed but *come on!*

That had been the only time Lovino had literally jumped away from him or put up any form of protest. Antonio seemed a little more aware of himself after that and refrained from

touching him too much on the sidelines and during the game, but that was it. Lovino wasn't exactly complaining about the affection but it was sending the wrong message to everyone, namely that they were together. He and Antonio were not an item, did not have any formal relationship, but it was hard to remember that when the boy would put an unthinking hand on his lower back when he wanted to get his attention or would run his fingers over Lovino's palm when talking excitedly about a show he watched to his housemates.

And when Lovino *did* remember that Antonio didn't want him for any long-term thing, that Lovino wasn't special to him, and that Antonio was probably touching him the same way he would unconsciously reach out to pet a dog... It hurt. It really fucking hurt.

Most of the time? He let himself forget. He couldn't ignore the truth forever and the pain of it hit him at odd moments, but he just...acted like they *were* together to keep from flinching at Antonio's touch. He convinced himself of the lie for long moments to keep from being overly caustic by his standards to everyone else. He may even have managed to start the beginnings of friendship with some of Antonio's housemates, Luciano in particular. It felt easy and good to believe what he wanted, but *God* the let-downs hurt. The mercurial nature of it wore on him and it was a relief to head back to his dorm room alone in the early hours of Saturday morning after the game.

Thank God their opponents had been only a few hours ride away; he wasn't sure what state he would be in if he had to go through this for an overnight trip. He would have to eventually, but at least then he would know what to expect and maybe even be immune to it. *Yeah, right.*

Feliciano had noticed that something was wrong and could probably tell that it was Antonio but didn't say anything about him. Instead, he was trying to cheer Lovino up by goading him into partying on Saturday night. Lovino didn't particularly want to go out; he was tired and weary and didn't want to be around people (Matthew didn't count as people to him). But his brother was trying and he hated it when things were tense between them, so Lovino reluctantly agreed to go.

Which is why he now found himself essentially alone in a crowded fraternity house. Feliciano had supposedly gone off to get them drinks, but that had been ten minutes ago. He probably ran into someone he knew and started talking to them, forgetting that Lovino was waiting for him. It wouldn't be the first time that happened with Feliciano and Lovino knew it wouldn't be the last.

He settled further into his holding-up-the-wall duties, scrolling aimlessly through his phone. He could have been looking for company for the night but he wasn't quite ready to do that yet. Lovino knew that he just would have been thinking about Antonio if he managed to pick up someone and he tried to avoid doing that. He had been the physical stand-in for someone his partners actually desired too often before to be able to do it in good conscience.

"—ino?" Lovino looked up and saw a girl who looked vaguely familiar speaking to him, brow furrowed. Once he looked up and faced her fully, the green-eyed girl smiled at him and came closer. She was dressed in a flowy blue tank top that he guessed would be called a blouse and black shorts. "It's Lovino, right? I'm Bella; we met at the activity—"

“—fair. Yeah.” Lovino straightened from his slouch and smiled back at her. She was one of the upper years who helped run the Community Gardening Club, was actually president of the organization. The first meeting was coming up that week and it had given Lovino something to look forward to that had nothing to do with class, soccer, or (lack of) romance. “I’m surprised you remember me.”

Her expression turned wry. “Not many people want to dig in the dirt anymore or had worked with plants long enough to hold an actual discussion with me about regional soil composition.”

Lovino shrugged but blushed a little. “I wanted to know what we would be working with. It’s still going to be mostly edibles, right?”

Bella nodded. “We have get ready to harvest some of what’s left before fully transitioning to the greenhouse. Winter comes fast here. But we’ll talk about all this on Tuesday, you know.”

“Yeah. I was looking forward to it. It would be nice to meet a few new people.” Not that Matthew wasn’t amazing, but he was just as busy as Lovino and he needed non-familial connections that were *not* Antonio.

“Freshman year not all it was made out to be?” At his wince, she laughed and it was a sound that turned heads their way. “Don’t worry, we’re a nice bunch. We’re mostly made up of a few hobbyists and like half of the botany department.”

Lovino hesitated, suddenly wary. “...the botany department?”

“Of course. Who else, the comp sci majors? But enough about that; why are you over here when you could be partying with the rest of us?”

“...I don’t actually want to be here? My brother dragged me here and has since vanished.” He threw a glare towards the stairway down which Feliciano had disappeared.

Bella grinned at him and started to say, “Doesn’t mean you can’t—“

She stopped when the music cut out in a way that was a little too familiar, sending a ripple of awareness through the room. *No! Just one night of peace, dammnit. One fucking night!*

An deep, throbbing beat and crooning vocals signaled that at least one of Antonio’s friends were here, the redhead that Matthew had become friends with. And if Death was here...

Bella pulled him from his thoughts by physically taking his hand and pulling him towards the stairs leading to the basement, where the drinks and main dance area was. “Come on!”

Lovino realized two things he probably should have been aware of before now: Bella was an extremely attractive woman and she was hitting on him.

Huh. She was *definitely* not Antonio, could never be mistaken for him.

He followed her willingly, both because he was interested in seeing where this was going and because he suddenly wanted to be off the ground floor of the house. He squeezed her hand

gently, just to let her know he had finally caught on. Bella looked over her shoulder and smiled at him before her gaze shifted to the right and behind him and she stopped moving. In a happy tone, she greeted, "Hey, Tonio."

Lovino froze as a not-quite-friendly voice replied, "Hey, Bella. I see you've met Lovi."

Bella dropped his hand as Antonio placed one on his lower back in a way that *felt* possessive and came to stand at his side. Lovino looked at him finally, taking in the long lines of him and his darkly amused expression. Bella said, barely audible, "Wait, *he's* Lovi?"

Lovino greeted, "Bastard."

Antonio answered with a grin, "*Hermoso.*"

Bella sighed and Lovino blinked, looking back at her. She was smiling, glancing between them, and shaking her head. "Gay or taken."

Lovino's automatic response was, "I'm bi." Then he realized what that implied and tacked on hastily, "And not taken."

She raised her eyebrows at him as Antonio moved his hand to lightly grip his waist and pull him closer. "I think my vice president would have something different to say. I'll see you both on Tuesday."

Lovino opened his mouth to say something but Bella slipped away, laughing to herself. So he closed it, looked at a smug Antonio and said, "You're VP of Community Gardening, too?"

"Didn't you know? I'm a man of many talents."

"Yeah, sure," Lovino said, rolling his eyes and unsuccessfully fighting a smile. He didn't resist Antonio leaning down to kiss him, hand cupping his jaw carefully. When Antonio pulled away, Lovino's heart was pounding and he was trying his damnest not to think. While they were still close, he couldn't help saying softly, "Hey, Tonio."

When he smiled, it lit up his face, his green eyes dazzling Lovino a bit. "Lovi," he said, just as gently, and oh, *God*, this hurt.

Forget, He told himself. *Forget! Pretend. Hide. LIE!*

It got worse when Antonio pulled away and took his hand. "Come on! I wanna introduce you to my friends!"

"What?" Lovino asked when he really meant, *Why? Why do you want to introduce me to them when I'm nothing to you?*

Antonio didn't seem to hear him as they wove their way through college students at various levels of intoxication. They managed to get to the corner of what probably was a living room during non-party hours and, because of the crowd, he didn't really get a good look at anything before Antonio pulled him free of the crush of people and to his side. "Hey, look who I found," Antonio said and Lovino found three people staring at him. They were all

some level of cruelly beautiful, Antonio fitting in but by far the most approachable out of them on looks alone.

At a loss for what to do and with Antonio still holding his hand, Lovino lifted a palm and waved awkwardly. "Sup. I'm Lovino Vargas."

They all smirked at him in unison and *why was he here again, good lord*. "Oh," said the blond. "We know who you are."

If anything can give him his mental footing, it's feeling like he's being made fun of. Lovino scowled and said, "Care to return the favor?"

Someone snickered but exactly who was lost to the sounds of the party. "Of course, silly me. I'm Francis, he/him. I'm Tonio's best friend and would offer to shake your hand but..." He looked down pointedly at where his and Antonio's fingers are now intertwined and Lovino couldn't help the blush.

"Pity," Lovino said dryly before looking at the other two. "I know who you both are, thanks to Mattie."

"Should we be flattered?" Alistair asked, amusement on their face. "Gilly, I think we should be flattered."

"Hmm, I don't know about that, Scottie." Piercing crimson eyes focused on him and *Jesus*, but *this* was what Matthew was attracted to? No wonder he hadn't felt much of anything for Denson (besides that whole bullying thing). "Depends on what he said..."

Lovino's response was to smile slowly at the boy until Gilbert blinked and seemed to blush himself. His friends didn't let this pass, Antonio wolf whistling at him and Francis saying, "Is that a flush on your face, Gil? My word, I never thought I would see the day."

"Och, ye don't know tha half of it from his end," Alistair said, tease evident on their face. "Those two...I get it comin' and goin'."

Everyone (even Lovino) laughed but Gilbert, and the noise of the party seemed to rise in response. Someone bumped into Lovino from behind, making him stagger, but Antonio steadied him before pulling him, as easy as breathing, into his arms. Lovino forced himself to stay relaxed, to stay unaffected as Antonio hugged him from behind but it took more than was pretty. *You are together*, he lied to himself. *It's natural for partners to touch each other in front of their friends. There's nothing to fear in this.*

Lovino leaned back a little into the embrace and Antonio said in his ear, "You okay, *mi tesoro*?"

"Yeah, just startled," Lovino mumbled looking at the floor.

Antonio hummed and moved so that his breath was no longer in Lovino's ear. "What?"

"Oh, nothing!" Francis said and Lovino looked up to see all three of Antonio's friends looking at the pair of them, assessing. These were people who knew Antonio, who probably

had watched countless others in Lovino's situation and knew all the signs of someone wanting more from their friend than he was willing to give. He was *such* a fool.

But that fact didn't stop the low thrum of pleasure and warmth from these displays of affection that Lovino always felt with him. It didn't make the highs he felt with Antonio any less perfect. All of this was temporary; he had to enjoy what he could, when he could.

If it meant he could keep feeling this cherished and loved, even though it was a lie, then he would happily remain the fool.

Lovino met Alistair's eyes then, on accident, and watched the redhead frown a bit. *I should leave*, he thought, the voice of reason soft in his head, damn near silenced at Antonio's touch.

But first... Lovino fixed a glare on Gilbert and tried to not fuck up the one relationship he thought he was getting right in his life. "You. I don't give a fuck who you are. You hurt Matthew, you die." There was a moment of stunned silence in the group at his declaration. Antonio's hold loosened on him a bit and Lovino straightened but kept his eyes on Gilbert. "Got it?"

Antonio hugged him again tighter and was speaking rapidly in Spanish, but his tone was cooing. "What the fuck are you saying?" Lovino demanded.

"He's essentially calling you cute," Francis said, bemused at Antonio's display.

Lovino scowled and tried to push the taller boy off of him a little. "What the fuck? I just threatened your friend and you call me cute?"

Antonio pouted at being pushed away but went. "Lovi, you know he's called *War*, right? There's no way you could beat him."

Lovino raised his eyebrows and met Gilbert's eyes again, seeing that the albino boy at least knew that he was serious. "I never said I would do it."

Antonio froze at that and Alistair started laughing uproariously. "Oh, God, he's serious! Yer alright, Lovino. I respect a man who's willin' ta threaten someone in front of their friends fer someone else."

Lovino shrugged, still watching Gilbert to make sure that he understood. "It's Mattie."

They nodded. "Fair."

Gilbert finally nodded to him a little as Francis said, "I have *got* to meet this person."

Alistair grinned and said, "He's a menace. Ye would love him."

Lovino rolled his eyes. "He's too innocent to be a menace."

"He's too likable. Yer threatening *War* over him. I bet Ludwig would disown him if he upset Matthew—"

“Hey! Leave him out of this,” Gilbert said.

“Hell, *I* like him. Oh, and Gilbert’s attracted ta him and he only likes human disasters. A feckin’ menace.”

“I resent that and you,” Gilbert grouched but he was begrudgingly smiling at them.

“Ye say tha sweetest things. Makes me head spin.”

Lovino was begrudgingly amused by all of this and found he...liked Antonio’s friends. Or, at least, he didn’t find them immediately insufferable. Huh. He looked at the boy who had reduced his contact to merely holding his hand again and asked, “They always like this?”

Antonio was looking at him steadily, like he had been staring at him this entire time, and grinned. “We all are. Hey, are you drinking anything? I was going to grab us all drinks if you wanted something.” Lovino shook his head. While a drink would have been a helpful relaxant with just him and Feliciano in this space, he had to keep as much as his wits about him with Antonio around. Antonio didn’t push him on it, looking at his friends instead and asking, “The usual?”

Gilbert and Francis both answered in the affirmative without further comment but Alistair said, “Let me help ye carry those back up.” They straightened from their artful slouch against the wall. “Party feels like it will be one of tha fast burnin’ ones.”

Antonio nodded and, with one final squeeze of his hand, left with them towards the stairway. Lovino caught himself staring after him and quickly looked back to the two juniors he was left with. Gilbert was looking at his phone, texting, but Francis was looking at Lovino like he saw far too much. Lovino, trying to avoid a conversation over whatever he was thinking, asked, “What did they mean by ‘fast burning’?”

Gilbert looked up and nodded generally towards the room. “You notice anything different?”

Lovino crossed his arms instinctually at the testing question, but looked back towards the party. Outside of the little circle of space around their group, individual details were actually difficult to see, simply because of the number of people filling up the room. This...was not how it was even five minutes ago. “Where the fuck did all of these people come from?”

“Around,” Francis said with a shrug. “People tend to find us pretty quickly.”

“They can’t resist our awesome presences,” Gilbert snickers.

“Parties usually aren’t shut down because of fights or anything like that,” Francis continued with barely an eye roll in response to Gilbert. “Someone in the neighborhood complains about the noise or reports the honest fire hazard that the houses become. Other times, it’s alcohol poisoning. It’s rare that we have to shut down a party anymore.”

Lovino frowned. “Both why and how would you four shut down a party?”

Gilbert and Francis exchanged glances. “You haven’t been told about the Rules, have you?” Francis asked.

“What rules?”

Gilbert raised his eyebrows at him. “There’s a set of simple rules we enforce in whatever party we’re at. It basically boils down to basic human decency, with the highlight of don’t sexually assault anyone. We all took...issue with how things had gone down at a couple of parties the last couple of years and earned a small—“

“Big,” Francis interjected.

“—reputation of shutting down fucked up shit, with violence if necessary. Why, out of everything, do you think campus collectively settled on calling us the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? It’s because we end everything if we have to.”

“Thanks to that reputation, women feel safer being where we are than most other places on campus and guys follow them. And the good thing about having a reputation is that we don’t have to do a lot to back it up anymore. We may have gotten in a bit of trouble last semester —“

“We damn near got suspended, Francis. We would have been if Scottie hadn’t outright threatened the administration.” *They did what now!?*

“—but what’s done is done. What Alistair meant about this party being fast burning is that there are too many people here, too fast to avoid trouble for long.”

“Here we go!” Antonio said, breaking back into the shrinking circle of their space through the crowd, a drink in each hand and Alistair right behind him. He handed a cup to Francis while Alistair went back to their place at Gilbert’s side.

“ETA?” Gilbert asked, taking a cup from Alistair’s hand.

“30, tops.” Alistair said before taking an indelicate drink from their cup.

“Lovi,” Antonio started, putting an easy hand on Lovino’s back again. Once he saw he had Lovino’s attention, he leaned in and asked, “Do you want to stay over tonight and spend tomorrow with me?”

When Lovino automatically tensed, he hastened to continue. “We haven’t had a chance to just hang out together and I wanted to change that.”

Lovino looked down and cleared his throat, knowing he was going to say yes but trying to put it off a little longer. “I-I have to do homework tomorrow. And, if I stay over, I should at least stop at my dorm to get some clothes and stuff.”

“Makes sense,” he said, leaning just a bit further into Lovino’s personal space, making it hard for him to think beyond the fact they were very likely going to be bare against each other soon. “I need to do some work, too. We can stop by your dorm before heading back to my place?”

Lovino looked up to meet Antonio’s eyes, wanting to say yes, knowing that he would do so but so fucking confused as to why Antonio would ask this of him. Them hanging out was one

thing; Lovino *packing a bag* so that they spend the day together after fucking was...

He couldn't voice any of this. All he said was, "Okay."

Antonio grinned at him and Lovino looked away again, heat filling his cheeks. His eyes found Francis who was looking at him with far too much understanding in his eyes. Lovino quickly focused on Antonio again and said, hoping to escape this situation, "Want to dance?"

Antonio seemed surprised but took Lovino's hand and said to his friends, "I'll see you all later."

They all said some form of derisive farewell (directed at Antonio) and Lovino didn't look at any of them as he said over his shoulder, "See you around."

The deeper they went into the party, the harder Lovino fought to stop thinking, to just live in the moment.

He won that battle, all the while so fucking sure he was going to lose the war.

It wasn't like Antonio was completely oblivious to the fact that what he asked of Lovino was unconventional for two people not in an actual relationship. He saw the flashes of surprise and wariness from Lovino when he suggested something or touched him casually. He kept waiting for Lovino to pull away, or tell him no, or make any sign whatsoever that what Antonio initiated was unwelcome. But he never did. In fact, he seemed to take to Antonio's suggestions immediately, if not eagerly.

And that was very confusing.

It was obvious that Lovino had taken the non-exclusivity thing to heart, considering how Antonio had found him last night with Bella. It had only proven him right, that Lovino didn't want to commit to anything right now, no matter why Alistair felt the need to ask him if he was sure about Lovino's relationship-aversion while they were getting drinks.

That being said, Antonio's feelings on the matter hadn't changed. In fact, they had gotten worse, the monster in the back of his head snarling at the sight of Bella leading Lovino somewhere and shooting him a flirty grin. He may have...lost some control of himself in that moment, putting a proprietary hand on Lovino's back to claim him as his. Lovino seemed to not know a word of Spanish, but Bella sure as hell did and she had clearly been amused at him answering Lovino's curse by calling him *Beautiful*.

But why hadn't Lovino said anything about it? For all that he was apparently afraid of commitment, why did he lean into Antonio's possessive touch and smile at him so softly after they had kissed in greeting?

Maybe it was wrong of him to want to monopolize Lovino's time so that he wouldn't have energy to seek out someone else. But, heaven help him, he truly didn't care. Antonio would be as public about them as he could get away with, scaring off any of Lovino's potential

bedmates, if it meant that he would be the only one to see Lovino like this. And, Antonio discovered throughout Sunday, *this* meant a lot of things.

This meant brokenly begging him for more as they made love, tears streaming from his eyes in pleasure.

This meant how vulnerable and young he seemed as Antonio took care of him after he had made him moan and cry and come.

He didn't want anyone else waking up and seeing Lovino's face peaceful in sleep, curled against him and wearing careful marks from their mouth.

He hoarded watching the full process of Lovino waking up; seeing him as he frowned at his work, papers spread in front of him in Antonio's bed, as he threw flirty barbs Antonio's way; knowing that a sudden expression of elation flashed over his face when he figured out something that had been challenging him.

This meant telling a funny story to him and making him truly laugh, only to find it to be one of the most entrancing sounds Antonio had ever heard.

Antonio had a particular thought at multiple times a day. He told himself this lie, tried to make himself believe it down to the marrow of his bones, when they woke up from a shared nap, when they made out but didn't feel the need to have sex, when Antonio caught Lovino smiling at him for no reason at all.

This is enough.

Sunday evening, Matthew looked up from his homework as the door opened from his peripheral vision. He started to smile in greeting at his friend, but Lovino looked...tired. Worn down.

He removed his earphones and asked tentatively as Lovino walked into the room, "Lovi...?"

Lovino kept his eyes down as he said in a low voice, "Hey, Mattie."

Well, fuck. Matthew shouldn't ask *are you okay* since the answer was clearly *no*. He shouldn't ask if Antonio hurt him because *obviously*, though probably not in a way that Matthew could deck him over. At a loss, he settled for, "Did...did you have a good time? With him?"

"Mostly," Lovino mumbled and Matthew was concerned but felt helpless. "He was great. I'm the problem here."

Matthew wanted to jump in and say *no, you're not!* But he knew that wouldn't help, not really. Picking his words very carefully, he remembered the choice Gilbert had given him last week and how it had reassured him. Lovino had his back to him, bag on the ground and hands braced on his desk. Still, Matthew watched him carefully as he tried to help. "I doubt it. What do you need, Lovino? If talking about it is something you don't want to do, I won't

force you. I could distract you with something? If you want to talk, I'll listen. If you need me to respond with outrage or sympathy or absolutely nothing at all, I'll do that, too. Just...let me help you. Please. And I'll try to be what you need me to be."

Lovino slouched a little, the action similar to curling in on himself, before he shuddered. Voice thick, he said, "If I lose control now, I don't know when I'll be able to regain it. I... don't want you to see me like that."

"...If you want me to leave, I will. It's your choice. But, no matter what you tell me, no matter how you act, I won't judge you."

"How could you not?" Lovino asked and, mercy, he sounded awful, voice choked from strain and watery from contained tears.

Matthew swallowed and went for the truth, "Because I think that I would feel similarly in your situation. Because I would want someone there to keep me from drowning in what I was feeling and thinking. Because I've been through shit and had no one I really trusted to be on my side. And I don't want you to think that you have to deal with this alone."

"...I'm going to cry. A lot."

"Okay. Do you want me to hug you through it?"

"...*Please.*"

He sobbed then and Matthew reached out to make sure that the tissue box and trash can were close by. Then he scooted his desk chair around so that he was bodily facing the rest of the room and said, "Please come over here. If you don't want to sit in my lap I get it but—"

Lovino was already turned around, hand over his mouth but eyes showing how distraught he was, and headed towards him. Matthew smiled sadly at him and reached for his friend.

He didn't track time as Lovino sobbed alternatively into Matthew's shirt and a fresh tissue. He just was there for him, praying that it was enough. At some point, a while after Lovino had given in to his need to be comforted, he began explaining brokenly how awful it was to be treated like he was Antonio's partner by everyone, including Antonio himself, while knowing he was far from it. It would have been easier if he treated Lovino as a convenient fuck so he could at least detach emotionally from the situation. But Antonio was apparently so wonderful to him that he found it impossible to be distant. And it was killing him. Unfortunately, the thought of not having that slice of false happiness was something Lovino feared more than his current pain. He was hoping to become desensitized to the situation. He had never had someone treat him as well as Antonio and was hoping this honeymoon stage of infatuation with the boy would wear off.

Matthew wasn't so sure that would happen, but didn't voice this thought. He stayed quiet through Lovino's crying and talking, thinking that his friend just needed someone who would listen rather than try to tell him what to do. They had both known that Lovino's choice would hurt him when he agreed to the arrangement with Antonio. This was the price Lovino was willing to pay.

This was the price that Matthew would not let stand for much longer. He resolved then and there that if he could do *anything* to get Antonio to take his head out of his ass long enough to see that they already were in an exclusive relationship (they spent so much time together, when the hell did they have time for anyone else?), he would. Well, as long as the likely outcome would not put Lovino in more pain than he already was in.

When Lovino was done, he awkwardly got up and said, “Thank you, Matthew. Really.”

“Hey.” Lovino cautiously met Matthew’s eyes and he smiled kindly at him. “It’s what friends do. I’m here if you need me.”

“I know. Doesn’t mean I can’t say I appreciate it.”

“Fair. Now, I am going to get ready for bed. If you want, there are water bottles in the fridge and my secret chocolate stash in the top drawer of my desk.”

“*Bless. You.*”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! Only having a minor mental breakdown over here. Thank God for spring break. I had to cut this as it was approaching 20k words and this half was done already. That’s also why the original took so long—it is long. And what is now chapter ten is close to ready to go so *shrug* Please forgive inaccuracies related to what various majors do in school. I could only take the two after all.

Chapter Title Song: “Heaven or Hell” by Digital Daggers (long lyrics chain but listen this song was on point for so many relationships here). "We tried to run, we tried to hide in fear of losing ourselves. We tried to keep it all inside so we don’t hurt someone else. When all the demons come alive, I’ll still be under your spell. This could be heaven or hell."

Chapter 9: Are You Gonna Get Hooked or Not

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lovino looked at his brother, torn between amusement and distaste at his obvious excitement as they waited for Matthew to return to the dorm room with Ludwig in tow. Considering his situation with Antonio—who he had slept with *again* after practice yesterday, following the awkward Gardening club meeting where everyone had looked at him with surprised interest when Antonio greeted him with a kiss and effectively killed his confidence in attempting to mingle—Lovino had absolutely no room to judge him.

Didn't stop him from doing it anyway.

"Fuckin' hell, Feli, calm down. You don't even know the guy."

"I know enough to suck his dick, thank you." Feliciano said flippantly and Lovino choked on air, utterly scandalized. Feliciano saw this and rolled his eyes. "Ve, don't look at me like that, Lovi. You and Tonio are like rabbits," Lovino blushed furiously at that, "and Mattie is dating Gilbert. I deserve my shot at a happy ending, dammit!"

Lovino would accept that as fair from anyone who wasn't his little brother. Siblings have different rules, after all. With little ground to stand on, Lovino grumbled, "We don't fuck that much."

"I call B.S." Feliciano said, drawing out the initials. Lovino winced, not denying it further since they did manage to fuck at least three times a week. "Anyway, I need to talk to him to figure out just how queer he is. It would be a shame if he was hetero with thighs and a face like that."

He was at a loss for how to deal with his brother, horrified that he would say such things while also proud that he had been such an influence on him. Fuck, but he was a bad role model, wasn't he? Lovino cut his losses and said, "Little obvious there, Feli."

There was the sound of voices in the hall outside of his room and Feliciano grinned at him. "Ve, no worries. I'll be cool."

A key sounded in the lock as Lovino started, "I really wasn't worried about—"

"—and this is my room." Matthew said as he opened the door, smiling at the blond behind him. He turned and faced the two of them. "You've met Feliciano but I forgot to introduce you two. And that's, Lovino, my roommate. Feli, Lovi, this is Ludwig, my friend from psych."

Lovino eyed Ludwig critically, remembering that Matthew had asked him specifically to be nice after he had complained a little too long about Feliciano's vocal anticipation for this evening at the lunch table. And Lovino definitely owed his roommate.

Matthew had been surprisingly wonderful since his minor breakdown on Sunday, though perhaps he should stop being blindsided by the other boy's kindness at this point. He had done enough in the hours and days since to let Lovino know that he cared and was concerned without making him feel coddled, a line that very few people could walk with him, yet Matthew did so instinctively. And that was after knowing him for all of three weeks. Lovino knew that Matthew wouldn't see what he did as anything special to be paid back, but that just made Lovino making his life easier all the more important.

But there was something about Ludwig that irritated Lovino. He found his eye twitching a little against his will as Feliciano beamed at the boy, eyes wide and intent. Feliciano stood from where he had been sitting in Lovino's desk chair and quickly offered his hand with a wide smile. "Ve, nice to officially meet you."

Ludwig blinked and Lovino saw his posture, already military straight, become positively rigid as he looked at Feliciano. Then he took Feliciano's hand and said, "You as well." It was polite, but lacking the same warmth that Matthew's niceties always had. In fact, all the Lovino was getting from him was a distancing cold that Matthew seemed immune to and Feliciano (rather distressingly) seemed intrigued by.

For fuck's sake.

"Sup," Lovino said, the word barely more than a grunt. He waved in one abrupt flick of his wrist, not offering a handshake. He was comfortable sitting cross-legged on his bed and was not inclined to move.

Ludwig released Feliciano's hand and met Lovino's eyes. He almost flinched from the neutral look alone and his reaction only tried his already fraying patience. Ludwig said, "Hello, Lovino. Thank you for hosting."

"Yeah, well..." Matthew cleared his throat pointedly and Lovino didn't have to look at him to understand what that meant. "It's no problem. Mattie asked." Lovino shrugged, hoping that explained enough.

Ludwig frowned a little while Matthew grinned at him. Then Matthew began to move, pulling out his computer and saying, "Thanks, Lovi. Now, after speaking to each of you and to avoid a possibly time consuming debate, my suggestion is that we watch *The Two Towers*. Any objections?"

Lovino narrowed his eyes at him. "It's the fucking extended edition, isn't it?"

Matthew's smile turned wry. "Well, it is the version I own. Don't worry; us adding our own commentary will make go by faster. It's not like we don't know the plot, after all."

"Sounds good, Mattie," Feliciano said. "I've got popcorn."

"I agree. I have also brought a few boxes of movie candy, though I was not sure what people liked," Ludwig said, tone a little hesitant as he awkwardly hefted his backpack hanging from one shoulder.

“I’m sure we’ll like it, Ludwig,” Feliciano said, looking up at him on the edge of the boy’s personal space.

Oh, God. He was going to spend four hours in a room having to listen to his brother flirting with Matthew’s friend.

Desperate times, desperate measures. Besides, he didn’t want to be the only person not contributing to this disaster waiting to happen.

“I have wine,” Lovino said casually. When everyone looked at him, he shrugged and said, “Not that anyone should drink if they don’t want to, but there are drinking games associated with the movie that might make it more fun.”

To his surprise, it was Ludwig who said, “If it is the most popular one for the movie I know of, then we will likely get alcohol poisoning without modifying the rules.”

Both Lovino and Matthew stared at him, nonplused, but Feliciano turned towards Lovino’s tiny closet where they had put the wine when he had first moved in. “So we’ll adjust the rules. Ve, are there still cups in here?”

“Yeah, same place as usual.”

“Um...” Matthew started. “I want to but I have practice in the morning.” Matthew chewed on his lip a little, clearly torn and it made Lovino wonder if that was all he was thinking about. Alcohol was banned in freshmen dorms and there were signs in all the common areas decrying drinking games through various Captain Picard memes, but Lovino knew that wasn’t the problem here. For all that Matthew was big on responsibility, but kind of skirted the rules.

He had practice in the morning, too, but he also had “sparring” in the evening with a certain junior. Matthew was acting like it was no big deal, but Lovino had caught him trying on combinations of *work-out clothes* when he had to run back to the room for his computer halfway through the day. He had insisted it was nothing, but his face was incredibly flushed at the lie. He also threw something at Lovino as he rushed out the room and quipped that *nothing* also texted him at all hours of the day.

(*That off-hand comment made him realize that Matthew and Gilbert texted each other a hell of a lot more than he and Antonio. Sure, they saw each other at practice and they hung out in person a little, but the only time Antonio texted him was if he was horny and wanted to know if Lovino would be free after practice. It was further proof that Antonio wasn’t interested in Lovino so much as Lovino’s body. He had known this, of course, but fuck, why did the reminder have to hit so hard every time? Lovino’s response had been to text Antonio to see if he was free after the club meeting and practice. The sex didn’t exactly help, but it sure as hell didn’t hurt.*)

“Then don’t, Matthew,” Lovino said, tone more kind than he had used with either Ludwig or Feliciano. Matthew probably wanted to be in top shape tomorrow and Lovino understood that. “Would you be uncomfortable if we played?” He noticed Ludwig looking between them out of the corner of his eye but thought little of it.

“No, it’s just...fuck it. I’m in.” Matthew nodded to himself determinedly and saw to setting up the movie.

“Are you sure?” Ludwig asked.

Matthew looked at him and Lovino recognized his stubborn expression. “Yes. Now I’m going to sit on the bed with Lovino.” News to him, but sure. “Would you and Feli be okay with sitting in the desk chairs in front of us?”

Perhaps he shouldn’t have done this.

The drinking game didn’t get as messy as it would have if they hadn’t been drinking wine, but it still proved to an inexperienced Matthew something crucial.

For all that he was tall and strong, he was a lightweight.

After a half-full solo cup of wine, he couldn’t stop smiling and felt pleasantly warm...and like he had lost his sense of balance a long time ago. Luckily, Lovino didn’t seem to mind him first leaning against him then curling himself to rest his head on his shoulder. Lovino seemed his usual self as he told him to get off of him at first while scooching just a tad closer.

He kept looking back worriedly at Ludwig to make sure he was having fun and was pleased to have him join in on their running commentary about a quarter of the way through the movie.

(He was also pleased that he and Feliciano seemed to get on well. As for Lovino, he was just happy that the disparaging comments about the blatant flirting—from Feliciano—were at a minimum.)

About a halfway through the film, Lovino said, “Mattie, fuck marry kill: Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas.”

“Hmm, by marry do you mean steady sex or no sex?”

“No sex. We’re going by the Straight™ definition of marriage. Or, at least, a long life with a friend with romantic attachment but no sex because fuck that resentment bullshit. And ‘fuck’ just means sex with no emotional attachment, but no limit on how many times.”

Matthew frowned. “What’s the point of sex if you don’t feel something for that person?” There was a long moment of quiet, only filled in by the rising score as Aragorn was found by his horse. He looked up and saw everyone, even Ludwig, looking at him like he had lost his mind. “What?”

Lovino shook his head at him. “Had to make it a philosophical discussion. *Fine*. ‘Fuck’ means emotionally fulfilling sex but no relationship.”

“Then how is it emotionally—“

“Landscape,” Feliciano said and everyone dutifully took a drink.

“Oh, nevermind! Forget I asked.”

Matthew frowned, sad that he had ruined Lovino’s attempt at fun and might have risen bad thoughts to his friend’s mind. He laid his head back against his shoulder and said, “Fuck Aragorn, of course. Marry Gimli and kill Legolas.”

Lovino burst out laughing, his shaking almost dislodging him. “What the hell, Mattie?”

“I stand by my choices! Dwarves are very devoted partners, you know! And Aragorn is just...” Matthew gestured to the computer screen like it explained everything.

Ludwig chuckled and Matthew couldn’t help grinning at the sound. “That is fair.”

“See! He gets it!”

“Honestly, for people attracted to men, who *wouldn’t* fuck Aragorn?” Feliciano said and that was a good point.

“Hmm,” Matthew said, seeing the appeal of the game and how Feliciano was trying to suss out Ludwig’s sexual preferences. “Well, what about the other Men? Faramir, Boromir, and... Karl Urban’s character?”

“Éomer,” Ludwig supplied.

“Yes, him.”

“Faramir’s a bit soft for me,” Feliciano said contemplatively, earning a (encouragingly pointed?) look from Ludwig. “So that leaves me with marrying Boromir and fucking Éomer.”

“Gross. This was a *mistake*.” Lovino said lowly, so only Matthew could hear.

He couldn’t help but giggle. “You started it, Lovi. Just act like he’s not your brother,” he replied in a whisper.

“What about you two?” asked Ludwig.

“Drink!” Feliciano interjected before either he or Lovino could answer.

The game continued like this for some time, interrupted by the odd commentary here and there and periodic directives to take another drink. And they didn’t just stay within the realm of Middle Earth.

“The hobbits.” (Lovino: That’s four people. Feliciano: Like Merry and Pippin aren’t a package deal.)

“The three Elvan leaders.” (Matthew: Really ?...You know they were all played by people in marvel movies, yeah?)

“Hela, Ronan and Red Skull.” (Matthew (laughing): That wasn’t an invitation Ludwig!)

“Hemsworth, Pratt, Evans.” (Ludwig: Ah, yes. The many Chrises. Lovino (wryly): Is the Chris Pine solution on the table?)

“Falcon, Winter Soldier, Captain America.” (Matthew (glaring): I mention that to you ONCE—Lovino: Own your truth, Mattie. And Feli will have the most trouble here, not you.)

“Valkyrie, Black Widow (Iron Man 2), Gamora.” (Feliciano: I was getting testosterone poisoning.)

“Poison Ivy, Catwoman, Harley Quinn.” (Ludwig (shrugging): Needed a universe change.)

Matthew lost track at some point, barely aware of what he was saying, just knowing that he was happy and warm and felt so fucking carefree. They were approaching the climax of the Battle of Helm’s Deep and had traveled in picking trios between fictional characters and real people, both contemporary and historical. It was then that Feliciano said, “Okay, TV Merlin, Arthur, and Gwaine.”

“Foul! I call foul!” Matthew said, laughing while still managing to be affronted. He had migrated to rest his head in Lovino’s lap at some point when the Ents were talking and he felt no shame in admitting that he loved the fact that his hair was being played with. He almost never touched anyone casually, but after Sunday he didn’t even question the impulse with Lovino. There was a chance he was touch starved. Huh. “I refuse entertain killing any one of my darlings. Pick other people to choose between. People we all know.”

Were his words slurring? He didn’t think they were. His fingers were tingling but it was fine. Everything was fine. Everything was *fantastic*.

“Oh, fine. Antonio, Alistair, and Gilbert.” Lovino said to him, immediately tensing after he said it. “Wait, *don’t* an—“

Matthew was too far gone to stop himself from answering.

“Kill, marry, fuck. I’m pissed at Antonio, I’ve spent the most time with Alistair, and Gil’s the only person I’m attracted to and would consider fucking in real life. Feli?”

“Er—“

“What did you just say?” Ludwig asked turning around with a frown.

Matthew blinked at him and said slowly, “I would kill Antonio, marry Alistair, and fuck... oh.” *Fuck, oh fuck, abort mission!* “Oh, no! Forget I said that!”

“Matthew, you just said that the only person you are attracted to is *my brother*. That is not something you forget,” Ludwig stood and Matthew could read the hurt on his face. “Are you only friends with me because—“

“No! No, of course not!” Matthew said, straightening and sitting on his knees. “You’re my friend because of who you are, not who your brother is! You’re smart, a good listener, and really nice, Ludwig. Hell, out of the three people in this room, I would choose to marry you!”

“Hey!” both Lovino and Feliciano said at this but Matthew wasn’t worried about that now.

He pushed on, leaning forward on his hands as he pled Ludwig to understand. “I hadn’t even *met* Gil until after we were friends! Whatever I feel about him has absolutely nothing to do with you. Please believe that.” He felt his eyes sting with tears at the panic of almost losing this friend and because he couldn’t quite control himself.

Ludwig relaxed, but seemed troubled as he looked at Matthew’s face. “I believe you, Matthew. Please do not cry. It is...unnerving.”

Matthew nodded as he wiped at his eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to tell you because I felt weird about it. Will you...will you finish the movie with us?” He looked at him hopefully and Ludwig only seemed more disconcerted by it.

“Yes, of course.” Matthew grinned at him and Ludwig sat back down and...pat Matthew on the head.

Matthew settled back against Lovino’s side and tuned back into the movie. Or at least, he would have if Lovino hadn’t asked, “Why wouldn’t you marry me, Mattie?”

“Because Ludwig is calmer and has less drama.” Matthew straightened to see him frowning. He kissed him on the cheek just because he could and laid his head back on his shoulder. “I *would* fuck you though. No offense, Feli.”

“Ve, none taken, but I think you’re cut off, Mattie. No more wine for you.”

Matthew pouted at him. “Why not?”

“Because I think you gave my brother a stroke. Let me get you some water, too.”

“Yes, that seems wise,” Ludwig said, looking skeptically at Matthew.

Matthew was more concerned about Lovino. He rested his chin on Lovino’s shoulder and blinked at his friend, concerned. “Did I give you a stroke, Lovi? Did I hurt you?”

Lovino pinched the bridge of his nose and laughed a little. “No, you precious bastard, I’m fine. But *you* are not allowed to drink anymore.”

Early the next morning, Ludwig started getting text messages.

Matthew: I am so sorry.

Matthew: I remember everything. I didn’t know I would be like that.

Matthew: We’re still friends, right? I really want us to be friends.

Ludwig sighed but knew what his answer would be. Matthew was a good person, a good friend, and he couldn’t help who he was attracted to. Plus, he had seen very few things as

disturbing as Matthew on the verge of tears because of him. It had been like a kick to the stomach, every single protective instinct he had rising at once.

Besides, someone needed to watch his back when it came to Gilbert.

Ludwig: Yes, Matthew, we are still friends. Are you well?

Matthew: Thank goodness! :)

Matthew: And yeah. Practice was hard but I no longer feel like death warmed over.

Matthew: I'll see you in class?

Ludwig: As always.

Matthew: :)

There was no mention of Gilbert, which was interesting. Matthew really must have meant the separation thing.

At that moment, his brother entered the kitchen, shuffling towards the coffee machine. "Hey, West."

"Good morning, Gilbert," he said, looking over his brother carefully. He seemed tired, which was fair considering how much work he did, but Ludwig still found himself looking for evidence of Matthew's attraction to him.

"How was hanging out with Mattie?" he asked, voice still rough of sleep, and Ludwig realized that he had said *Mattie*. Not Matthew, as Ludwig always referred to him as, but *Mattie*.

Just like Matthew had called his brother *Gil*.

Goddammit. Ludwig finds one (1) friend and not three weeks in, his brother is in a relationship with him. That both of them failed to mention!

To test his theory, Ludwig shrugged and said, "It was fun. Matthew drank a bit too much and was more...affectionate than usual." Ludwig watched carefully as his brother froze where he stood, hand about halfway towards the carafe. "More talkative, too."

"That's interesting," Gilbert said, voice only a tad strained as he resumed moving like he had never stopped. "What did you watch?"

"*The Two Towers*. We were playing a modified drinking game for it. Lovino is...abrasive but was kind to Matthew. Matthew actually used him for a pillow most of the time." Gilbert paused again, as if he had a feeling of where this was going but wasn't sure. "As you can imagine, he was quite put out when, during a game of fuck marry kill, Matthew said he would rather marry me than him."

"Ludwig—"

“But because Matthew’s such a *nice* and *good* person, he gave Lovino a kiss on the cheek before saying he would fuck him if he had to choose. Guess what he said when your name came up.”

Gilbert turned around and looked at him, face arrogant and smirking. Ludwig knew that was his blank face, the one he used when he would rather not broadcast what he felt. “Depends on who else was in the bracket.”

Ludwig shot his brother a disbelieving look before asking, “How long?”

Gilbert winced and sighed, leaning back against the counter. “A week. Nothing official or anything and it’s mostly just potential but...I like him, West. I *really* like him.”

Ludwig could see that on his face and from his reactions to Ludwig’s words. Gilbert rarely liked anyone enough to be jealous over them. The last time that had happened was... But Gilbert was serious and Ludwig realized that he couldn’t stop this. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to, but one thing had to be made clear.

“I will not stand in your way, East, but do *not* hurt him. Do you understand me?”

Gilbert started to laugh. “You’re giving *me* the shovel talk?” When he saw that Ludwig as serious, he said, “I’m your brother!”

“That is how I know you need to hear it.”

Gilbert’s smile turned wry and said, “Fair enough, but I don’t want to hurt him. Hurting Matthew seems like...a crime against nature.”

Ludwig couldn’t help but smile a little as he gave his blessing, “He does remind me of a puppy at times.”

Gilbert laughed again and turned to finish making his coffee. “And you love dogs. But he’s no innocent puppy, West. That boy is a wolf in sheep’s clothing that sometimes forgets he has sharp teeth. He can more than handle himself.”

Ludwig raised his eyebrows at him. “How would you know that?”

“The first time I saw him after meeting him, he was beating the shit out of a heavy bag.”

“He what? Matthew can do that?”

“...You haven’t seen the video have you? Here; I saved it on my phone before it was taken down and forgot to delete it.”

“Why would you—“

“Because I knew it would be taken down and that moment needed to be memorialized. But because Mattie didn’t know it was being filmed and is a little uncomfortable with it, I meant to delete it. Since he’s already mentioned it to you, I don’t think he’ll mind you seeing it too much. Watch and you’ll understand what I mean.”

Six minutes later, with his whole worldview turned upside down, Ludwig said, “What the fuck?”

“I know. The duality of that man. Isn’t he great?” Gilbert grinned at him over the mug of his coffee, leaning against the counter where he had been watching Ludwig’s reactions. “Now, are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“What Mattie said during the FMK game.”

Ludwig wasn’t exactly angry with Matthew that he hadn’t told him the he and Gilbert had already starting to see each other but... “Ask him yourself.”

Gilbert fully intended to ask Matthew about the FMK game, but found he wanted to ask him in person. The timing only made it natural to ask him that evening when Matthew attended the MMA sparring session. He could guess from Ludwig’s reaction that Matthew either chose to fuck or marry him, but there had to be something else, right? Because most FMK responses were meaningless without someone justifying their choices to their friends.

Ludwig was also not someone to beat around the bush, so whatever it was had to have made him know that Matthew felt something for Gilbert, but without giving away that it was reciprocated.

The question of what Matthew had said about him was distracting throughout the day, to the point that he had to actively push it away. There was no use dwelling on it since he could tell him that evening, but the mental image of a tipsy, overly-affectionate, and probably overly-honest Matthew had staying power.

And, honestly, his attachment to that image was a marker of his own sanity as far as Gilbert was concerned. He could barely handle Matthew’s wide smile while he was sober and in control of himself. But his smile, open, lazy, and completely unreserved after a few drinks would probably short-circuit his brain. They hadn’t physically touched much and the last time he had seen Matthew in person was when they had gotten coffee the week before when they had both been cautiously determining what this was—or could be—between them. But now that they knew each other more, the thought of caution stripped away to the point that they could be honest with each other, with Matthew not concerned about boundaries...they could hold hands or even hug. They could—dare he think it—cuddle.

All the cuddles.

He physically face-palmed at the thought in the middle of the day despite being in public. He ran the hand through his hair to make it less obvious in case anyone was watching. *Smooth recovery there.*

Gilbert had it so bad that he was giddy at the thought of just holding Matthew close in a completely non-sexual way. It wasn’t his fault that Matthew was so adorable! But...yeah, he should just ask him out at this point. This was ridiculous.

Decision made, Gilbert realized that it probably didn't matter what Matthew had said the night before about him. Oh, Gilbert still wanted to know, but it wasn't likely to discourage him from asking Matthew on a proper date. He wasn't going to ask for any kind of commitment, not wanting to tempt fate or scare Matthew off, but he wanted to get their relationship to the point that it was unquestionably romantic.

Gilbert settled on asking after the session that evening and mentally fortified himself to do so.

Alistair was the first to arrive, as was customary for them. Gilbert had refrained from mentioning that he was going to ask Matthew out that night, but the knowing smirk on his friend's face gave him the distinct feeling of being late to the party on that one.

"What's that look for, Scottie?" Gilbert asked, wary and coming out of a stretch. Alistair had been silent on the teasing front about Matthew the entire week, which, now that he thought about it, was downright suspicious.

"Well, hello, nice ta see ye, too. Don't ye trust me, Gilly?"

"With my life? Yes. With not embarrassing me in front of Mattie? Not really."

They blinked at him in a way that was probably supposed to convey innocence, but there was a glint in those green eyes that did nothing to reassure him. "I'm hurt. Ye know I want ye two together. I'm the captain of tha' ship."

"Uh huh."

"...I'm savin' tha embarrassing stuff until after yer together." Of course they were. "By tha way, when are ye gonna pin him down, hmm? Mattie's kinda oblivious with stuff like this and remains unconvinced that ye like him as much as he likes ye, which is ridiculous since I'm pretty sure yer a lost cause. Ye gotta spell these things out fer him." For all of their teasing, Alistair was serious. The slight smirk hadn't left their face, but their eyes were earnest and that kept Gilbert from getting defensive.

"Yeah, I figured. I had to literally tell him point blank that I was attracted to him to get him to believe it."

"Ye had ta...unbelievable. I *told* him and ye don't know what subtle means—"

"Pot. Kettle" The door opened and a couple of regulars walked in. Gilbert lifted a hand in greeting, but Alistair didn't turn around, still intent on him.

"—and ye haven't answered my question. *When* exactly are ye gonna just feckin' ask—"

"Tonight, okay? Afterwards, if a get a chance."

"Good. Noo, who are ye gonna pair him up with?" Gilbert looked at them. "Ye can't just throw him ta tha proverbial wolves, Gilly. When was tha last time he actually sparred with someone?"

They might have a point, though it really depended on what his background skill level was. Even so, it was a call back to Gilbert's conversation with Ludwig in the morning and he smirked. "And I'm the big bad wolf in this situation?"

"Ye *wish* ye could blow—"

"Hey, everyone!" Gilbert said to the people who kept trickling in, loud enough to cut off Alistair. *I walked right into that one.* "Warm up for now and we'll start in about ten minutes."

Matthew came in on his last word and oh, good Lord, he was fucked. He was wearing loose sweatpants and a too-large blue t-shirt that made his blue eyes stand out, especially since he had to be wearing contacts for how quickly he focused on and smiled at Gilbert. His hair was tied back into a low ponytail and a small gym bag that looked familiar over his shoulder. Absolutely nothing about how he was dressed should have left Gilbert speechless. They hadn't seen each other in only a little over a week and had texted each other at least every day yet...there was something about seeing him in person that really drove home that not only did Gilbert *like* Matthew, but that he never really had a chance.

He heard Alistair's snort of amusement and realized that Alistair had started standing next to him at some point. Gilbert had been completely unaware of what he was doing and only hoped that he hadn't done anything obvious to people who weren't his best friend. Alistair waved at Matthew, who was already walking towards them, and greeted, "Hey, Mattie. I see ye finally made it to one of these."

Matthew shrugged and his smile turned wry. "Yeah. I'm still not sold on the partner thing, but we'll see. How are you both?"

"Tha usual." Alistair replied.

"You mean begrudgingly amused by everything and suffering from the idiocy of others?" The tone was a familiar tease and it was solid proof that they did see each other more than Gilbert probably realized.

"Tha's tha one." They smiled at him before their eyes shifted to something behind Matthew, "Speakin' of which, excuse me."

They left and Matthew turned to Gilbert with an expression of slight puzzlement before clearing. "How are you, Gil? Did your professor get back to you about your architecture proposal yet?"

Of course he remembered that. A low heat came to Gilbert's face as he answered, "I'm alright. And yeah, actually. Had a few suggestions but had generally positive feedback. What about you? I heard a bit about last night..."

Matthew visibly tensed, face paling. "You did?"

"Yeah..." Gilbert frowned a little, wondering if he was that embarrassed about whatever he said. If his reaction had anything to do with the FMK game, that is. "You watched *Lord of the Rings*? West said he had fun."

“Oh.” Matthew all but sighed out, smile now full of relief. “Yeah, it was great. I was happy to introduce him to my friends. So, um, what’s the procedure here?”

Gilbert blinked at him for a second at the unsubtle topic change and decided to let the FMK thing go. His burning curiosity was cooled by Matthew’s obvious distress. Teasing him was fine, something he looked forward to doing more of, but actively embarrassing him in a way that would really upset him? It wasn’t worth it. “People are just warming up before I go over the rules and try to set up the first pairs for the night. We usually like to switch people around at least once during the evening, but depends on who is here and relative skill level. When you last took classes, what was your belt color?”

“Purple. For Jujitsu. I got to brown before I stopped taekwondo.”

Gilbert nodded, impressed and thinking through just who Matthew could fight. It wasn’t a long list out of their total membership and maybe three people out of who was here already. “You would definitely be with the more experienced members, then, though the different styles will be interesting. Would you be okay being paired with me at the start?”

“*You?*” Matthew blurted, causing Gilbert to raise his eyebrows. He then blushed and then rushed to say, “Well, I mean, you’re the club president and actually *teach* MMA...”

Gilbert shrugged and tried to come up with logical reasons why he was a great...sparring partner...for Matthew. “I have either sparred or watched a match with every member, so I’m a decent judge of who to pair people up with. But you can say, no, Matthew. I don’t want you to feel like you have to do something you’re not comfortable with, ever. Alistair makes good pairs, too, or we could just guess and see—“

“No, I’m fine! Being with you, I mean.” Their eyes met and held for a long tense moment. Matthew looked away and cleared his throat before saying, “I should put my stuff down and start warming up then.”

“Yeah.”

Matthew left to do just that and a very smug Alistair caught his eye. Gilbert discretely gave them the finger (making them laugh, to Matthew’s visible confusion) before turning his attention very firmly towards doing his job.

He checked in with the regulars and made sure to greet the newest members. He was naturally shit at remembering names, so he worked hard at it and happily only had to ask one person to reintroduce themselves. He did it in a self-deprecating manner, the only kind of interaction he had cared enough to develop some modicum of diplomacy around.

Since the only “meetings” were on Saturdays, all Gilbert had to do was briefly rattle off the rules (which boiled down to don’t fight dirty and *please* don’t actually hurt each other) and decide the pairings.

When Gilbert ended by saying that he would be with Matthew, returning students who knew him suddenly became very interested in who exactly that was. As a rule, Gilbert only paired up with people upon request or if he needed to prove a point, with Alistair as his default

partner. For the unassuming Matthew to fight him on first appearance in the club space, a lot of people apparently had questions.

Pairs broke off and claimed spaces around the room as their practice area. Matthew followed him easily to the far end of the room and Gilbert stomped a sudden wave of anxiety down. *Yes, Gilbert, physically fighting the boy you definitely want to date is the best idea and not at all weird. That was a perfectly healthy impulse.*

God, why was he like this?

“Do you think you’re warmed up enough, Mattie?”

“Um, probably not,” he admitted with a wince.

“We don’t have to start right away. We won’t be the only ones waiting.” That was certainly true. In the room-length mirror, it was easy to see other pairs doing moving stretches and chatting before actually squaring up.

“Okay, cool.” Matthew immediately started doing leg rotations. Gilbert stretched his shoulders—which tended to get sore after doing a bunch of desk work—and Matthew said in a low voice, “Um, is it just me or are a lot of people watching us?”

Gilbert turned and caught a lot of people moving their eyes away at his glance. He narrowed his eyes at them all before blanking his face and shrugging to Matthew. “They are probably just curious about you as the only new person. They’re a nice bunch and it’s nothing to worry about. Their matches will distract them in a few minutes anyway.”

“Oh, alright.” Matthew lowered his gaze and continued stretching.

A somewhat awkward silence, punctuated by the normal sounds of effort in a fight, fell between them that Gilbert was confused by. After a long moment, they both started saying something at the same time.

“Were you able to—“

“About last night—“

They stopped and looked at each other before Matthew rushed to say, “Go ahead? What were you saying?”

Gilbert was far more interested in where Matthew had been planning on taking the conversation. “I was just going to ask if you’ve gotten far enough ahead on work to let yourself have some fun this week. But I want to know what you were going to say.”

“I...yeah. I’m about four days ahead and I want to stay that way.” *So he’s likely free this weekend. Good.* “And, um. Last night.” Matthew hesitated and his face flushed a little. “I kinda mentioned to Ludwig that I—that we know each other. He was pretty surprised.”

Gilbert said carefully, “Yeah, he mentioned that this morning.” Matthew tensed again suddenly and, since he was stretching his quad at the time, lost his balance. Gilbert swiftly

stepped forward to steady him with a hand on his arm. “Careful, Mattie.”

“Thanks,” Matthew said quietly, Gilbert close enough now to not have to strain over the ambient noise. Matthew cleared his throat and Gilbert let him go. He started to take a step back but Matthew reached out and gripped his shoulder while he stretched his other leg. “What did he say?”

Asking Matthew to spar with him was either his best or worst idea ever. Being so close but unable to do any of the things that immediately came to mind... “That he’s cool with it.” *With us being together.*

“That’s good.” Matthew let him go and backed away. “I think I’m okay to start. You?”

“Yeah.” At the word, the soft bashfulness in Matthew’s expression hardened to something assessing and he could meet Gilbert’s eyes without trouble now. It was thrilling to see the change in him in real time and Gilbert couldn’t help a small smile. “Do you want me to go easy on you?”

“No.” With no further elaboration, he went into a natural fighting stance that Gilbert studied for a second before going into one of his own.

The first fight with someone is usually the hardest to win, if only because you don’t know how they approach things yet. He would see if he could draw this match out, if only to get a feel for Matthew’s default fighting style.

Gilbert started with a lower guard than usually advisable, but it was a position that worked well enough for him in adaptability. Matthew watched him, eyes neutral now, and neither of them moved for a beat. Gilbert took the first step and it was to the side. Matthew adjusted his position minutely but didn’t actually move until the next step.

Cautious. He was very cautious.

Gilbert knew how fast Matthew could move if he put his mind to it. He would try to make sure that Matthew didn’t have enough room to use his speed.

Gilbert advanced and, rather than waiting for Gilbert to come to him (and build momentum), Matthew met him about halfway. He surprised him more by striking first, hands moving fast enough that all Gilbert could do was block him.

When Matthew gathered himself again, Gilbert pushed back with hand strikes of his own, until Matthew was far enough away to make a roundhouse feasible. Matthew dodged the kick with a fast spin that brought him into Gilbert’s guard, elbow first and at chest level.

Gilbert took it with a short sound, but it didn’t hurt nearly as much as it should have; Matthew must have pulled it. Still, it was enough to put him off balance. Matthew tripped him, but didn’t move fast enough to keep Gilbert from pulling him to the floor, too.

Matthew landed harder than he did, taken by surprise, but wasn’t more than a half second behind Gilbert in fighting for control as they grappled.

What followed was a confused half minute of furious motion and near-misses. Gilbert kept the advantage, but Matthew was smart and made him fight for the win. It was a very long thirty seconds.

In the end, Gilbert was straddling Matthew's torso, sitting a little too high for him to feel like it was a secure hold, but he really needed to keep Matthew's arms on the mat. That and the fact that they were sparring didn't change how precarious the situation might become if he was straddling the tops of his thighs and using his body weight to hold him down. He might forget where he was and what he was supposed to be doing.

Matthew was breathing heavily and still straining against him, trying to free his hands and throw Gilbert off of him. He settled more of his weight on him, straightening his legs a little to ground himself. Gilbert looked down the mere inches between their faces and met Matthew's fighting-neutral expression with one of his own.

His voice was little more than a grumble as he said, "Yield, Matthew."

Matthew blinked, surprise flashing across his face, before he huffed a brief laugh and titled his chin up in blatant challenge.

"I'll yield, Gil," Matthew said, voice low and with mischievous glint in his eyes that put Gilbert on edge, made him forget himself just a little. "But you have to earn it first."

Matthew suddenly pushed hooked his foot around one of Gilbert's legs and straightened it to unsteady Gilbert as he pushed with far more strength than expected with the other—putting Gilbert suddenly on his back. As he flipped them, Matthew had freed his hands and grabbed Gilbert's wrists. Before he could react past his shock, Matthew had the edge of his forearm pressed against his neck, the rest of his body settled heavily over Gilbert's with wrists held down by the press of Matthew's other forearm. Matthew apparently didn't have the same hesitation over using his entire body to keep Gilbert down, even if he was clearly a little overstretched. Gilbert could have gotten out of it, but only if he hurt him and that was something he was unwilling to do, never mind that it was against the rules.

Matthew was staring down at him from a *very* short distance, panting from the sudden effort and adrenaline and there was a silence in the room that Gilbert barely noticed. Neither of them moved for an infinite moment, Gilbert personally unable to think past the rush of blood in his ears and the near blinding lust in his head.

Good intentions who?

Someone, probably Alistair, cleared their throat pointedly, shaking them both out of the stillness they had settled in to. Gilbert stared into arresting blue eyes and said quietly, "I yield."

Matthew rolled to the side of Gilbert immediately, laying on his back and trying to catch his breath. *Good Lord*, but that had been difficult. Thank fuck he had managed to take a restorative nap between his miserable, hungover practice and now. Still, the only reason he had managed at all was because Gilbert had been taken off guard for some reason.

He was grinning, but not consciously. Gilbert sat up, seeming to have recovered already and looked down at Matthew with an unreadable expression. Something about it made Matthew sober and ask calmly, “What?”

Gilbert’s mouth quirked and he stood as he said, “I underestimated you. More accurately, I didn’t expect your legs to be that strong.”

Gilbert reached a hand down to help Matthew up and he took it gladly. He stood, noting the strength in Gilbert’s hand as he pulled, and tentatively teased, “I thought that after Matthias you wouldn’t make that mistake.”

His expression sharpened to something predatory and he said smoothly, “Let me rectify that.”

Matthew frowned at him. “Right now?” He was damn near winded and Gilbert wanted to go again?

“Why not?”

“Well, you’re used to this kind of work out, I’m not. I need a minute to recover. But after that, sure.”

Gilbert smiled but there was an intensity to his eyes that made him feel a bit hunted. Gilbert stepped back and Matthew only noticed then how close they had been standing together. He blinked, shook his head to himself, and turned to find his water bottle.

There was a hush to the room that seemed odd to Matthew, so he looked around and caught a lot of people staring at him before turning away quickly and resuming whatever they were doing. Alistair came over to Matthew, abandoning their partner momentarily and looking positively gleeful (which was unsettling). Matthew eyed them warily as dug through his bag and he picked up his water bottle. “Why do you have that look on your face?”

“Just happy ta see tha two of ye gettin’ along. Let me know if ye want ta switch partners; Gilly has a way of wearin’ people out.”

Yeah, no shit. Matthew hummed as he swallowed a mouthful then set the bottle down. “I think I’m good for now but thanks.” He pulled up the collar of his shirt so he could wipe the sweat off his face, not mindful of the fact that the motion made the loose-fitting t-shirt come up enough to display his hips and stomach.

“Holy shit,” someone whispered in the still-quiet room and Matthew looked around to try to see who had spoken, frowning in confusion.

Alistair snorted a laugh and Matthew turned his frown on them. “What?”

“Yer an enigma, Mattie. Have fun!” Leaving Matthew more confused than before, Alistair returned to their sparring partner. Cutting his losses and having fully caught his breath, Matthew turned back towards Gilbert.

He was waiting for him, arms crossed (*my, what strong arms you have*) and gaze considering. Gilbert relaxed as Matthew came closer, but the glint in his eyes hadn’t left. “Ready?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Matthew steeled himself and settled into his go-to fighting stance.

Gilbert rushed him. It was startling but Matthew kept his head and prepared to take his weight on and force them to the floor again. But Gilbert didn’t try to tackle him. Instead, he dropped and tried to sweep Matthew’s legs from under him.

Matthew jumped on instinct, beyond thought in that moment. But being forced to take both feet off the ground was not a good thing. Gilbert popped up remarkably fast as Matthew landed, got a hold on him, and put him on the ground in a classic hip throw before he could get his bearings.

Matthew didn’t hurt himself when he landed, but he hit the ground hard and it was disorienting. Still, he tried to recover, turning to put his back to the floor to face Gilbert. But Gilbert was already there, pulling one of his arms behind his back despite the resistance Matthew put up. He twisted Matthew’s arm behind him so that his hand was wrenched and against his back. Matthew tried to turn so that it wouldn’t hurt and he would be able to stop this, but Gilbert was already behind him, resting against his body as his arm snaked and locked around Matthew’s throat.

Matthew froze and Gilbert didn’t apply pressure anywhere enough to hurt him, but he had definitely won. “Well?” Gilbert asked, voice low and very close to Matthew’s ear. “Did I earn it?”

“Yes,” Matthew whispered immediately, not quite sure what he was agreeing to but knowing that was the only answer he wanted to give.

Gilbert released him and moved far enough from him that Matthew couldn’t feel his body heat anymore. He found himself needing more air than usual, despite the fact that he hadn’t managed to do anything to stop him. He turned around and looked up to see Gilbert standing again and offering a hand.

There was no triumph or gloating to his expression. No, that intention hadn’t left Gilbert’s eyes and Matthew found himself staring at him as he stood.

With Gilbert’s hand still in his, Matthew said, “Again.”

Gilbert smirked a little, clearly pleased at Matthew’s demand, and nodded.

Gilbert pinned him four more times in relatively quick succession, changing his approach and fighting style every time. Matthew worked to keep up and adapt, but Gilbert was a force of nature. Within a minute of them starting, Matthew found them repeating a familiar exchange.

“Do you yield?” Gilbert would ask in Matthew’s ear, securely pinning him but never hurting him.

“Yes,” Matthew would answer quietly, relaxing against Gilbert for a second before they parted, stood, and started again.

It was around the second time that Matthew cottoned on to the fact that this wasn't just sparring, but an intense, careful kind of flirting.

It was during the last time that Matthew realized he was enjoying it *far* too much.

They were grappling again, both of them breathing hard now, Matthew genuinely straining to keep Gilbert from using his body weight to pin him down. He had his thighs on either side of Gilbert's waist and had a thought. To use what leverage he had before Gilbert could stop him, Matthew lifted his hips and locked his legs around the lower part of Gilbert's ribcage. Then he started squeezing, not enough to hurt him but enough to make Gilbert short of breath and hesitate.

When Gilbert did just that, a sound from deep in his chest escaped as Matthew threw all of his weight into a turn that had Gilbert on his back and Matthew straddling him.

And that was when Matthew realized he was half hard behind his athletic cup and that the situation was worsening every second.

Their eyes met for a beat of shared surprise for very different reasons. Gilbert quickly pushed to take the advantage again and Matthew was honestly too preoccupied with not getting an erection to stop him.

This time, when Gilbert asked his question, Matthew's breath caught and he involuntarily shuddered as he gave his answer.

It might have been his imagination, but it seemed like Gilbert waited just a second longer than usual to get off of him. Matthew *knew* that he was blushing, not just flushed from the exercise. He took Gilbert's hand up, but this time he couldn't meet his eyes as he stood. He mumbled out something about water and all but ran from him.

Matthew made sure to not look at anyone, using fixing hair as he walked as a legitimate reason to be staring intently at the floor.

"Gilly," Alistair called from across the room. Matthew looked towards them and found their eyes going back and forth between him and Gilbert, their partner bent over and catching their breath across from them. "Yumi and Rhea need someone to ref their match and keep score." Gilbert must have looked at Matthew because Alistair rolled their eyes and said, "Och, let him rest. It's been how many rounds? Four? Five?"

"Six," Gilbert answered, but there was an undertone of...satisfaction? Matthew looked back towards him to say he was okay with them taking a break. Gilbert was now flushed with exertion and sweat rolled down his skin. His hair was an absolute mess but it somehow worked as a Look and he...was really hot. Matthew suddenly had the image of himself licking the sweat from Gilbert's neck (*Why is that appealing?! Oh, God, I'm losing my mind!*), Gilbert's hands on him and not for sparring, his voice asking something other than *do you yield* and...he no longer trusted himself not to say anything embarrassing. He simply nodded to him, eyes averted now, and Gilbert went.

He breathed a sigh of relief at the reprieve, before reaching to drink some water and just fucking sitting for a minute. He sat with his back to the wall and rested his head against it, eyes closed as he tried to gather himself and push his unwieldy and unwelcome arousal back into its box.

“Hey,” said an unfamiliar voice after a long moment, presumably to Matthew. He opened his eyes to find the person that Alistair had been sparring with speaking with him, looking worse for wear than Matthew felt. He had curly, ink black hair, pale grey eyes, and light brown skin, and was built like a runner.

“Hi,” Matthew replied, at a loss for what else to say.

“You mind if I...?” He gestured to the space next to Matthew and Matthew shook his head. The guy sat next to him, far enough away that it wasn’t uncomfortable but clearly still by him. “I haven’t seen you here before. Are you new to the club or just a new student in general?”

“Oh! I’m not actually a... Gilbert just mentioned that he could find a sparring partner for me, but I’m not a member.”

He smiled crookedly at Matthew as he crossed his legs. “Maybe you should be. I’ve never seen anyone go more than three rounds in a day with Gilbert except for Alistair. You shouldn’t feel bad that you lost, by the way. Gilbert’s a meticulous organizer, but he’s president for other reasons.”

Matthew frowned a little at him. “I’m not upset about losing. I just...” *needed to get my hormones under control so I didn’t make a fool of myself* “...needed a bit of a break. I might not even spar anymore tonight. I should probably just cool down before heading home, now that I think about it.” He had practice in the morning and would really rather not be more sore than necessary tomorrow.

“That’s a shame,” said the boy and Matthew must have looked as confused as he was. “It’s always good to have new people come in to mix up the pairings a bit. And you said Gilbert would find you a partner...” He trailed off and Matthew took his words at face value.

“Oh, that. I’m don’t think I should have a regular partner. I try not to do heavy workouts regularly outside of practice and my plate is pretty full already. I wouldn’t want to be paired with someone only to never be available.”

The boy was looking at him like Matthew was a puzzle that he couldn’t make sense of yet. “That’s pretty consid—“

“Mattie.” Matthew looked up to see Alistair approaching them and he smiled at them in greeting. “Ye done fer tha night?”

“Yeah, I probably should be with practice and all.”

“Then go stretch before ye cramp up.” Alistair reached a hand down to pull Matthew up and he took it, rolling his eyes a little. They then looked at the boy Matthew had been talking to

and said, “Ready fer tha next round, Mitchel?”

That sounded more like a challenge than a request. Mitchel blinked at them and Matthew noticed that he had really long eyelashes. He answered, tone wary, “Sure.”

Mitchel stood and Alistair was looking at him blandly. “If ye want ta wait a bit more and since Mattie’s done fer that night, I’m sure Gilbert would be happy ta—“

“No, I’m good to go now!” Mitchel nodded at Matthew briefly before going to where he and Alistair had been practicing. Matthew found this all suspicious and looked over at Gilbert to see him carefully watching a match between two young women who seemed particularly skilled.

Matthew then narrowed his eyes at Alistair and saw them watching him steadily and with raised eyebrows. “What? I’m just tryin’ ta be helpful.” They pulled a *don’t look at me, I’m innocent* look and Matthew scowled at them. Alistair then laughed and turned away to go back to sparring.

Still not sure what to make of that, Matthew started stretching. He always did like the cool down period after a workout and fell into his own little world as he did his best to make sure he could move freely in the morning.

After some time, Gilbert got his attention with a soft, “Mattie.” Matthew opened his eyes and straightened from a split leg stretch that had him reaching forward and facing the floor. He looked up expectantly and saw Gilbert looking at him. “You’re stopping?”

“Yeah. I have practice in the morning and don’t want to overdo it.” Figuring that he had done enough to be able to move tomorrow, Matthew came out of the stretch and stood. “Are you all done?”

Gilbert shook his head. “We have about another twenty minutes in here and I always stay to the end.”

“Oh. Okay,” Matthew said, feeling a little awkward, especially as he remembered why he had really called it quits. He felt his cheeks heat and tried to ignore it. “T-then I’m going to head out now.”

“Alright,” Gilbert said, eyes searching Matthew’s face. “Did you have fun at least?”

“Yeah, though I don’t think we managed to do the one thing I came here for.” When Gilbert raised his eyebrows at that, Matthew continued with, “Finding me a partner, remember?”

That predatory intent came back into Gilbert’s expression and Matthew’s breath froze in his lungs as he said, “Well, I don’t know about that, Mattie. You didn’t like being partnered with me?”

I liked it way too much. “That’s not the problem.” Gilbert looked a little self-satisfied at that and Matthew tried to regain his composure. “Besides, you kicked my ass, Gil. If I were to regularly spar with someone, wouldn’t it make sense for them to be closer to my level?”

“You managed to pin me once. That’s not nothing and few manage to do that.” Gilbert seemed to come closer to him and Matthew found it was difficult not to look at his mouth. He failed and his eyes flicked down before he could stop himself. Matthew met Gilbert’s eyes again and knew he had seen that little slip.

Matthew caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked to the side, forcibly reminding that they were not actually alone, that everyone could see them thanks to the room-length mirror and now would not be a good time for them to jump each other.

Matthew bit his lip as he thought about what to say. Gilbert didn’t push him verbally, only reached out a hand to brush some hair that had fallen into Matthew’s face behind his ear. The touch was careful and had Matthew looking back at him and saying, “Tomorrow. I… I’m being dragged to the after-game party for the soccer team at Antonio’s place. Will you be there?”

Gilbert dropped his hand and said, “Yeah. I had a few things to take care of before that, but I’ll make it eventually.”

“Then I’ll see you there,” Matthew said in a rush, exhilarated to know when they could see each other again.

“Yeah, you will.” Tension stretched between them and Matthew needed to leave *right now* or he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from doing what his body wanted. So he nodded and moved away.

Matthew scooped up his water bottle, slipped on his shoes, and booked it out of there with a half-hearted farewell to Alistair.

“Ye need some water, Gilly? Because yer lookin’ pretty damn thirsty ta me.”

“I hate you.”

“I don’t know why ye keep sayin’ tha’; no one ever believes ye.”

“Sooo?”

“It was an excuse to roll around and get sweaty with me on the floor.”

“Fuckin’ told you so!”

Chapter End Notes

Lot of notes! I'm still alive, though law school did try to do me in. I leave the country in about 2 weeks for work and should have more time to write then.

I'm not sure if I've said this yet, but all my things are unbeta'd. I proof life 5 times but I'm sure the coding will mess something up cause it always does. Sorry! I'll come back after I've had a day at least away from this chapter.

Yes, OC, flirt with Matthew after that rather extended display. That was a brilliant idea, sir. I'm sure Gilbert didn't notice or mind. I'm sure Gilbert is feeling perfectly reasonable after pinning Matthew beneath him five times and being unable to do anything more than help him up. Riiiiight.

I mentioned a bunch of media in this chapter that I don't own, obviously. If law school has taught me anything, it's to err on the side of caution with disclaimers.

Did I set a year for this happening? If I did, disregard that. Time isn't a thing.

Oh, and if you understood what the Chris Pine solution was: congratulations for spending far too much time on the Internet. I have no room to judge, of course.

Chapter title (and it was hard to pick from all the great lyrics) is from Tanérelle's "Siren." "I've heard I can be a bad girl, but in the best of ways. One night with me and you won't be sleepin' for days. So are you gonna get hooked or not? Make the choice while you can."

Chapter 10: I Don't Bite (But I Heard You Might)

Chapter Notes

Get your kink bingo cards ready, y'all. Or a game of Guess Who: Kink Edition. Small warning: there is an implied offscreen attempt of sexual assault, but our favorite Horsemen step in to enforce their rules before it gets far.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Matthew had yet to decide if he was the good kind of anxious for attending his first college party. Yes, he really wanted to see Gilbert and maybe pick up where they had left off the night before but...he *really* hated parties.

Lovino saw the look of trepidation on his face as they approached the team house. "Calm down. It's just a party. You don't have to talk to anyone but me if you don't want to."

"Lovi, I shouldn't drink, I'm super awkward, you and Feli are the only people here I actually know, *and* I don't know how to dance!"

Lovino looked over him, considering. Matthew was wearing what Lovino had suggested: a simple, fitted blue button up and a clean pair of jeans. He had napped during the day so the fact that he had a...hard time sleeping peacefully wasn't obvious anymore. Nate had looked at him askance at his lethargy that morning and said that he looked stressed, but the nap had helped one problem at least.

As for the other...It was best not to dwell on it. That path led to guilt and shame and never being able to look Gilbert in the face again. He was very pretty and that would really suck.

Lovino said, "How about this: you drink *very* little to loosen you up, you stay close to my awkward ass, you meet some new people until Gilbert shows up, and I teach you how to dance?"

Matthew blinked at him. "That sounds reasonable. You would really teach me how to dance?"

He nodded solemnly. "I consider it a civic duty as your queer best friend to at the very least make sure you know how dance with a guy you're attracted to, which at the moment is a very short list."

"You. Y-you think he would want to dance with me?" Matthew asked, nervous. Dancing already seemed complicated to him, but to dance with and maybe be judged as a hot mess by Gilbert...

“As a start,” Lovino said cryptically as he knocked forcefully on the door to the large home. It was loud, but Matthew could hear the dance mix to one of the summer’s popular songs from outside and figured it was out of necessity.

The door opened and a tan boy that was a little taller than Lovino with slightly curling black hair and laughing ochre eyes opened the door wide for them. He wore a hunter green t-shirt, an open dark blue button-up, and stone washed jeans and looked familiar as he grinned at them.

The music was as about as loud as he expected without the barrier of the door.

“Elder Vargas! We were starting to think you weren’t coming.” Must be one of his teammates, then.

Lovino raised his eyebrows at him. “Who’s we?” Before he could answer, Lovino rushed to say, “I was a bit delayed making sure my roommate was ready. Martín, this Matthew. Matthew, Martín. He shares the house with Antonio.”

“And five other guys,” Martín said good-naturedly and waved them in. “Nice to meet you. Lovino will show you around.”

“Thanks,” Matthew said, surprised at the welcome. He went in first and saw Martín looking him up and down obviously.

“My pleasure,” Martín said wryly before looking at Lovino with a smirk on his face. “I’m sure Tonio just *loves* him.”

Matthew blinked, processing, but Lovino rolled his eyes and replied, “Him and everyone else. Come on.” Lovino pushed him further into the house, steering him away from what seemed like a living room towards the back of the house. As he was being pushed, Matthew caught Feliciano’s eye in the next room but was only able to smile in greeting before Lovino had moved them out of sight.

Once they cleared the staircase, Lovino stopped marching him forward and came around the side of him to lead. Loud enough to be heard over the music, Lovino said, “Ignore him. Martín teases the most, but a lot of people are pretty chill on the team.”

“Alright,” Matthew said but he was ruminating on what Martín had meant... Was Antonio the jealous type? And publically possessive of Lovino? Because that didn’t jive with what Lovino had been telling him, though Matthew believed Lovino had told him his interpretation of events. Touching casually was *very* different from being possessive enough for someone to comment. Hell, even touching enough to make people think you were in a relationship didn’t equal being outright territorial. At least, Matthew thought so.

Interesting.

The house wasn’t crowded enough to impede movement, but there were a good number of people talking in small groups or pairs along the walls or lingering in the larger spaces, nearly everyone holding a red cup in their hand. Lovino moved comfortably through the space, like

he was more than a little familiar with it. Then again, with how much he was here, Lovino could probably walk around this place blindfolded...or at least the route to Antonio's room.

The thought made Matthew shake his in silent amusement, though it faded when he recalled just what Lovino was going through because of his frequent trips to this house. He sighed.

"What?" Lovino asked and Matthew looked at him, surprised that he heard him.

"Nothing," Matthew said quickly.

Lovino looked at him askance. They walked through a large kitchen and a game room with a few guys playing pool—it looked like to impress a pair of girls who, at first glance, seemed a lot more impressed with each other. In the corner was a bar with someone who had to be another one of Lovino's teammates. "You want to try that again? Because you are the worst fucking liar when you're not at telling some part of the truth."

Matthew felt himself turn red and then told part of the truth and turned it into a slight tease to keep away from the sadder thought. "I just noticed that you seem to know your way around this place pretty well."

"...oh." Lovino blushed at that and stopped asking questions. For a moment at least. As they joined the short line to get drinks, he added, "You trust me?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, cool." Lovino approached the counter with a small smile and said, "Hey, Lu."

"Hey, Lovi! What's your poison, tonight?" Lu smiled and saw Matthew hovering. "Who's this?"

"Anti-social roommate. And a half cup of the punch, thanks."

Matthew rolled his eyes but smiled at Lu. "I'm not actually anti-social. I just don't know his friends. I'm Matthew, by the way."

He grinned back. "Luciano. What are you having?"

"He's covered," Lovino said, stepping away from the bar to let the girl behind them come up with a now empty cup, before frowning a little. "Are you always stuck behind the bar?"

"Nah, we have a schedule in the house and I wanted the first two parties. The same?" He asked the girl before fixing her drink.

Lovino handed him the cup and said very clearly, "Take three sips and give it back to me. We need you relaxed, not climbing into people's laps."

Matthew blushed but took the cup. "I wasn't in anyone's lap the other night."

"Wait," Luciano interjected. "That was for him?"

“Kinda. See you, Lu.” Lovino said before steering Matthew towards the kitchen. “Mattie, you were halfway in mine and more handsy than I had ever seen you. And I see you a hell of a lot. That was wine. This shit—“ Lovino nodded at the cup “—is a different beast. If you drink that entire thing and are *anything* like me, you would probably start making out with the first person who was reasonably nice to you. And if that person was Mr. Of-Course-I-Would-Fuck-Him—“

“Point taken,” Matthew said quickly, wanting to stop his friend before he finished that sentence. He tentatively tasted the nearly florescent red liquid and winced at the burning sweetness on his tongue. “God-*damn*, what is this?”

Lovino patted him on the shoulder, “That, my friend, is the punch. If you realize you stop disliking the taste, that means you’ve had too much.”

Matthew sipped at it again, taking a bit more than he did the first time. “Are you going to get one?”

“Nope. I’m drinking whatever’s left in that. Me, liquor, and clothes don’t mix well.” Matthew raised his eyebrows. “Don’t fucking look at me like that. I know my limits and am not planning on advertising what a slut I am.”

Matthew choked on his own breath, laughing even as he was caught off guard. “That’s fair. Only need one particular person to—“ Lovino elbowed him lightly in the side and Matthew smiled wider before taking his last mouthful. He handed what remained back to his friend and asked, “Now what?”

Lovino tipped the cup back as he drained it quickly enough for Matthew to be equal parts impressed and concerned. He wiped at his mouth and walked over to the sink. When the cup was half full, Lovino took a sip and gave it back to him. “Drink that, if only to get the fake sugar taste out of your mouth. Now, we go party.” Matthew followed along dutifully towards what seemed like a large (crowded) living room when the background music cut out and was changed. “Oh, Death’s here.”

Matthew frowned at him, something deep in his bones thrumming with the music. “Who?”

“One of Antonio’s friends; you know, the one you hang out with that you don’t actively want to jump.”

Matthew lit up. “You mean Alistair?”

Lovino cut his eyes to him slyly and smiled. “Yep; the M to Gilbert’s F.”

It took Matthew a moment to process that, but he blushed as he remembered the game from Wednesday. “Yeah. Please don’t mention that to them. I’m pretty sure they would think it was hilarious, but I *know* they would tease me about it endlessly.”

“Alright; let’s go.” Matthew looked around as they got to the living room and spotted the distinctive color of Alistair’s hair. They were standing with Antonio off to the side, familiar look of bemusement on their face from whatever the soccer player was saying. Matthew

touched Lovino's shoulder to let him know to follow him, before heading off to greet his friend with a smile.

Alistair saw him coming and straighten from their slight slouch against the wall before smiling back. "Hey, Mattie. I didn't expect ta see ye here."

Matthew shrugged and said, "I promised Lovi I would come weeks ago. He and his brother were a bit concerned that I was being a shut-in."

"Well, you *were*, you contrary bastard." Lovino said from his side. Antonio reached out for him and his friend moved closer to him, rolling his eyes and smiling a little as his...person took his hand. "You've been spending weekend nights studying alone in our room. What else was I supposed to do?"

Matthew wanted to complain about Lovino mentioning that detail, but realized that he had failed to explain why he had wanted Matthew to come to *this* party in particular. So Matthew shook his head and said, "I managed to meet people without going to any parties. Alistair's my friend. Right?"

He looked at the redhead with hopeful, expectant eyes and watched the amusement grow on their face. "Aye, we're friends. Though I will say yer by far me strangest mate."

Antonio whistled lowly, continuing to pull Lovino closer to him. "That's quite a title, Mattie."

Matthew looked at Alistair curiously, "Why would you say that?"

"Because I don't understand how ye can look and *be* innocent when I watched ye pin *Gilbert* ta tha mat last night." Antonio startled in surprise at the corner of his eye but Lovino's laugh caught his attention.

"Kinky. Didn't think you would move *that* fast."

Matthew felt the blush and crossed his arms, glaring at his friend. "It wasn't like *that*, Lovi, and you know it. And it only happened once."

"'Only happened once,' he says," Alistair intoned, tease in their voice.

"You're serious," Antonio said, eyes wide before he started laughing. He said to Alistair, "And Gilbert's reaction?"

"What ye'd expect," they said, leaning against the wall with a smirk on their face and hands in the front pockets of their jeans. Antonio laughed louder and Matthew got the impression he was missing something.

He moved over to Lovino who was watching the two juniors with a confused frown. He leaned against him a little and asked, "What do you think?"

His roommate looked at Antonio and Alistair with narrowed eyes before he smirked in return. He asked them, "I take it he doesn't get bested often?"

Antonio scoffed, “More like never. Alistair’s the only person who can regularly beat him and even that win ratio is *very* skewed in favor of Gil. He’s not called War for nothing.”

Matthew frowned at them both. “War? I guess that makes sense, but why are you all referred to as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in the first place? Lovi mentioned it passing but...isn’t that a little on the nose?”

Alistair gestured to him. “Ye see? Someone else who thinks it’s ridiculous.”

Antonio rolled his eyes at them all. “We didn’t pick it. No one really knows who started it either. But sometime around the middle of last year, people started greeting us by those names when we walked into a party together. We maybe could have stopped it, but it’s also super badass for people to call us that. Plus, its names people recognize, so we can get into damn near any party on campus if we want.”

“Huh.” Made sense. “By the way, congrats on your win.”

Antonio grinned. “Thanks. Three in a row! We really lucked out in terms of team dynamics this year.”

“Is tha’ what we’re callin’ it noo?” Alistair asked, quiet enough that only Matthew could hear them over the music.

Matthew started coughing to cover his laugh. “Sorry. Yeah, you all moved like a machine out there.” He drained the little water left in the cup and looked around. “Where’s the trash? Oh, wait, nevermind.”

In the thirty seconds it took Matthew to throw away the cup and return, Alistair was five feet farther from Antonio and Lovino. The two soccer players were kissing off to the side and Matthew decided to stay with Alistair. “You’re awful.”

“No, I’m fun,” they answered with a smirk.

“That, too. How are you, actually? We didn’t exactly get a chance to talk a lot last night.”

Alistair raised their eyebrows. “You checkin’ in on me?”

“I’m checking in *with* you and I do that with all my friends.” They stared at him, nonplused, and Matthew realized they had avoided simply answering the question last night, too. Edging towards concerned, Matthew softly prompted, “Alistair?”

They made an abrupt, sighing sound of amusement and smiled wryly. They said, “I’m alright, Mattie. Work load is a wee bit heavier than I thought it would be this early in the semester, but nothing to worry about. Yer turn.”

Matthew pursed his lips a little. “I didn’t ask you just so that—“

“I know tha’. Yer probably one of tha most genuinely nice people I’ve ever met. Doesn’t mean I don’t want ta know.”

“Oh.” Matthew settled against wall and said, “I’m okay. A little tired, a bit anxious and... frustrated.” Matthew’s eyes cut briefly to Antonio and Lovino who were just talking now but clearly oblivious to anyone else in the room *despite* the rising din of the party.

“Say more words,” they said and Matthew looked back at them. An idea formed and took root.

He remembered what Martín had said at the door.

“You know I care about my friends, right?”

“Obviously.”

Matthew leaned in to ask Alistair as quietly as possible, “Can I trust you with something and you’ll keep it to yourself?”

They raised their eyebrows at him and moved further into Matthew’s space, intrigued. “Generally. No guarantees if I think it will hurt someone I care about for no good reason.”

God, but their honesty was refreshing. “Is Antonio the jealous sort?”

Alistair regarded the couple, considering. “Not normally but with him? Yeah.”

“I’m going to trust that you won’t spread around the fact that I’m not the only person dissatisfied with their...arraignment. The other night I proved to be a rather touchy drunk, in an affectionate way. If Antonio got jealous enough, do you think he would actually *think* about this stupid no-relationship thing?”

Alistair frowned at him. “Have ye been drinkin’ tonight?”

He shrugged. “Only a little. Enough to make this seem like a good idea and get me past my usual caution to actually go through with it. But Lovi’s my best friend and I’m sick of the shit he’s going through because of this thing. So...” Matthew met their eyes to ask, “If I make him jealous, will this hurt or help?”

Alistair sighed and looked a little resigned as they leaned against the wall next to Matthew. “I knew this would be a problem. He’s stubborn and convinced this wouldn’t be. He’ll either get with the program or take the route of denial and double down.”

“I think I’m the only person that can do this without being a real threat to him. He knows about...Gil, right?”

Alistair grinned at him. “What about Gilly?”

“That I’m...” Matthew gestured, blood rushing to his cheeks for the first time in this conversation and hands flailing as he sought an accurate word. “...Preoccupied.”

They chortled at that. “‘Preoccupied.’ Mattie, yer hilarious. And, to answer yer question, I’m not sure if he knows how ye feel, but he is *very* aware of Gilly’s...preoccupation with ye. Since he doesn’t know ye like I do, he may not know yer an empty threat, as it were.”

Gilbert's preoccupied with me? Matthew blew out a breath and told himself to focus. "Do you think this is a good idea?"

"Yeah, but I'm not entirely sure if it's because it will get Tonio to get his head out of his arse or because I want to watch this for the entertainment value."

Matthew rolled his eyes but couldn't keep the smile from his lips. "Thanks for that."

"Yer welcome," they said, shit eating grin still on their face. Then Alistair elbowed him lightly in the side. "I'll try to help his thought process along. Tonio...I've never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at Lovino. I like gettin' me mates out of their own way."

Matthew smirked at his friend and said, "Me, too." Then he proceeded to amble over to his roommate, balance barely unsteady, Alistair following. *I have to make him jealous*, he thought. So he tried his best to be smooth and not the awkward mess he usually was.

"Lovi!" Matthew said, smiling widely and playing up his cheer just a little as he hugged him from behind.

Lovino leaned back against him and said, tone sour, "*What*, bastard? Why are you touching me?"

Matthew pouted. "You didn't mind the other night." Both Lovino and Antonio stiffened at that and Alistair started coughing loudly behind him. He leaned down and put his chin on Lovino's shoulder. "Besides, you said you were going to teach me how to dance."

Lovino sputtered, "Well *yeah*, but—"

Matthew whispered in his ear, tone serious to let him know that he wasn't as far gone as he was acting, "Trust me." Matthew had been steadily watching the other party attendees as they danced with their partners, so he tried squeezing Lovino's waist lightly as he said it. Then he looked directly at a frozen Antonio as he said, barely audible to other people and with what he hoped was a wicked smile on his face, "Tonio won't mind."

His friend shivered and Matthew was reassured that what he had learned from observing was going to be of some use. Lovino let go of Antonio's hand to turn around in Matthew's arms. "Yeah, alright. I guess I did say that."

Matthew grinned and released his friend to walk towards the mass of writhing bodies with some trepidation. He kept his anxiety off of his face as he looked over to Antonio's stricken expression and said as he deliberately took Lovino's hand, "Don't worry; I'll probably give him back."

Matthew pulled them away before Antonio could respond, but he *did* catch the look of near pain on Alistair's face from trying to keep himself from laughing.

Lovino followed him willingly, not pulling his hand from his, as they made it through the room. Matthew spied Feliciano on the other side of the room, mouth open in shock but eyes darting from them to where Antonio was still standing. Understanding bloomed on his face

before Matthew muscled and apologized his way into the crush of people. When they were far enough in that Antonio wouldn't be able to see them easily, he pulled his friend closer to him.

Lovino had a wry look on his face and leaned in close enough to ask, "Seriously? You know he won't get jealous, right?"

"Buddy, he already is. Now, we can stand here, or you can actually teach me how to dance to this."

The song playing was unrecognizable to Matthew, but it had a slow, grinding rhythm. "... Alright. Put your hands on my hips, stay on beat, keep your movements minimal and contained, and take note of what I do. And, for the love of God, try not to blush."

Gilbert was chatting with Francis as they walked together to Antonio's house. He had been anxious to see Matthew since the day before and extremely curious what he would be like in a party setting. He was still planning on asking him out but after last night...

Fuck just dating. He wanted to call Matthew his. So he would see if he wanted a boyfriend and was *really* hoping he said yes.

His phone buzzed a few times in his pocket as Francis' dinged. His friend was just updating him on the trials of his girlfriend's work-life, but he stopped mid-sentence as he pulled out the phone and started laughing uproariously. "What?" Gilbert asked, assuming it was the group message.

"See for yourself. It's for you anyway." Gilbert frowned as he pulled out his phone and unlocked it, heading straight for the group chat even though he saw that he had a couple of new texts.

He opened it to see a picture that was a little hard to make out. It was too dark and full of too many people to really get the details. He did notice a tall guy with blond hair and...Matthew? Matthew was in the middle of the dance floor?

P: GET. HIM.

W: what am I looking at here?

D: Comedic gold.

P: It's not fucking funny.

Gilbert raised his eyebrows. Antonio rarely cursed, even around his friends.

W: Still lost

D: Mattie asked Lovino to teach him to dance.

D: He's had a bit to drink.

D: P's taking issue with it.

W: ...eta 3 mins

"Unbelievable," he said aloud to Francis. He was going to check his other messages and saw Francis nod out of the corner of his eye.

"Agreed. We *tried* to tell him he fucked up but did he listen? If he has a problem with your Matthew dancing with him, how exactly did he think he would be okay with someone else sleeping with him?"

"He probably didn't think he would ever see it. And he's not mine yet." He had a couple of messages from Alistair.

"What do you mean, *yet*? Are you planning something, Gilbert?"

Gilbert hummed then scowled as he read the messages.

Scottie: You are damn lucky he wants to jump you.

Scottie: Tonio's face! I wish I'd recorded that.

Gilbert: wtf

Gilbert: is he drunk? I heard about the other night...

"I may be planning on asking him out," Gilbert said at Francis' gesturing for him to continue talking.

Scottie: Nah. He wanted to see if Tonio got jealous.

Scottie: But he's making it look real.

Scottie: Damn.

Gilbert: Are you trying to make me jealous?

Scottie: lol who's trying?

"Why do you have that look on your face?" Francis asked warily.

"Alistair's such a fucking troll."

"Yes; I thought we knew this."

Alistair was a troll, but they were not a liar.

Gilbert walked through Antonio's front door, Francis following behind him, and felt the party almost take a breath. This always happened when all four of them were gathered at one party. It was like a countdown started and everyone knew they had to rush to get in as much fun as possible. It wasn't their fault the cops kept being called; it was just a coincidence.

Usually.

They headed into the living room, where the dance area was usually found and the picture suggested Antonio and Alistair would be. Antonio was glowering at everything and nothing, Alistair looking about as delighted as they ever were. They saw him and Francis approaching and grinned in a way that put Gilbert on edge. “Gilly! Francis! Welcome ta tha party!”

At Gilbert’s name, Antonio’s eyes snapped to him. “Gilbert, I don’t ask for much, but I need you to get him off of Lovino.”

“Well, hello to you too, Tonio. Nice to see you,” Gilbert said even as he started scanning for Matthew and Lovino in the crowd.

“Yes, *hello*, Antonio and Alistair,” Francis said, coming around to Antonio’s other side. “Looks like you’ve got yourself in a bit of a situation, my friend.”

Alistair nodded, trying but failing to rid their face of amusement. “Aye. It’s not like ye can be offended and neither can Gilly. They’re both unattached, after all.”

“Unattached!” Antonio said, glaring at them.

“For now,” Gilbert said, eyes still searching for the boy that had managed to drive him crazy within three weeks of knowing him.

“Well, what *exactly* do you think non-exclusive means? It’s not even an open relationship.” Francis chimed in.

“*He’s* the one who didn’t want anything serious.” Antonio said lowly.

“Did he *say* those exact words, Tonio?” Francis pushed, having seen like everyone else how Lovino looked at Antonio when he forgot how people were watching. “Did you ask him if he wanted to be exclusive point blank and have him turn you down?”

Antonio froze and Gilbert stopped his search to see him pale a little. “No. He asked me. He... never actually said he didn’t want that.”

All three of them stared at Antonio, realizing exactly what that meant. “So *you’re* the reason this is happening?” Gilbert asked, turning to look for Matthew again. The mass of people shift a little and Gilbert saw why it had been so difficult to spot the tall blond.

Matthew was leaning over Lovino, with Lovino’s back pressed against his front and with his head bent close to his neck. Lovino’s arm was reaching up and behind him to hold the back of Matthew’s neck and Lovino’s face was...smug?

“I thought he was teaching him how to dance,” Gilbert said and he realized that his voice was closer to a growl than expected.

“...Maybe Lovino thought ta expand tha lesson a wee bit,” Alistair drawled. Both Antonio and Gilbert turned to glare at them, but Alistair just rolled their eyes. “Och, don’t look at me

like tha'. If ye want ta stop them before it goes any further, I *suggest* ye go get them, ye damn idgits."

That was fair. Not waiting to see what Antonio would do, Gilbert started towards the dance floor. The current song wasn't one he recognized, but it had a deep, pulsing beat that screamed sex and honestly, where the fuck did Alistair find all these songs? They said that they just listened to a lot of music while coding, but this was some pretty specific shit.

Gilbert worked his way to the pair and came up behind Matthew. Lovino was facing Matthew now and was smiling crookedly until he saw Gilbert's approach. He wasn't sure what was on his face, but he's pretty sure the brunet said *oh, fuck*. The sound of it was lost to the music and general noise of the party, but Gilbert smirked as he put one hand on Matthew's waist. He felt the boy tense at the unexpected touch and he leaned in to say in his ear, "Hello, Matthew."

Matthew let go of Lovino like the touch burned and stepped back only to run into Gilbert. Gilbert caught him, arms around him now and Matthew looked over his shoulder with wide eyes. "Gil!"

"Mind if I cut in?" Gilbert said slowly, eyes moving from Matthew to Lovino, who was unaware that Antonio was coming up behind him. Matthew's friend smiled knowingly and put his hands up in good natured surrender. He turned to leave them alone and ran right into a rather unamused Antonio.

Matthew was turning around in his hold and Gilbert let him. He stopped paying attention to his friend's drama when Matthew asked, "You...want to dance with me?"

I want to do a hell of a lot more than that, he thought. "Yes."

Matthew blinked wide eyes at him but reached up and looped his arms around Gilbert's neck.

Gilbert put both hands on Matthew's waist and moved them closer together, eyes not leaving his face. Color rose in his cheeks and his lips parted minutely before he looked away from him. Gilbert felt a shudder wrack his body and, oh God, but the things he wanted to do to this boy.

He started moving them to the song, remembering that Matthew didn't know how to dance. He did well enough that Gilbert wouldn't have guessed it first thing. Matthew followed him beautifully, extremely responsive to his touch and movements. About a minute in, he seemed to freeze before smoothly turning in Gilbert's hold to press his back against him. Gilbert went with it, frowning a little in confusion before watching his ear turn red. The only other time he had seen that happen was last night, when Gilbert had pinned him that last time and Matthew had shivered as he said *yes*, right before he had all but run from him and—

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Gilbert held Matthew close against him and fought the same reaction as they moved together. He leaned down and said in Matthew's ear, "I want to talk to you."

He shivered again and Gilbert was going to lose his mind. Matthew turned his head towards him and his pupils were wide as he asked, breathless, "About?"

His lips were pink and wet and *right there* and Gilbert only had so much self-control. He brought a hand up to tilt Matthew's head just a bit and kissed him. It was a soft touch of lips, one he couldn't resist but *really* wanting to talk to Matthew before they got into anything more than that.

Matthew had other plans.

When Gilbert pulled away to check Matthew's reaction to his kiss, to make sure this was okay, Matthew seemed to be in shock, body still and eyes closed. When Gilbert lightly ran his thumb over Matthew's cheek, deep blue eyes opened and focused on Gilbert's mouth. Matthew leaned up, turning so their mouths met again and their chests were pressed together and oh, fuck yes.

Any good intentions flew out the window and Gilbert kissed him back, hand on his lower back pressing them together and Matthew once again looped his arms around Gilbert's head. Matthew's kisses were enthusiastic but still careful, like he was happy to be doing this but was very self-conscious. Gilbert didn't want him thinking like that, didn't want him to be doing anything but feeling what them together could be like. Gilbert licked at his mouth and Matthew immediately opened for him. Gilbert felt his moan, felt him melt against him as blunt nails moved over his scalp and he kissed back.

Perfect.

Gilbert pulled away then, gently and not going very far. He became aware again of the fact that they were in the middle of a dance floor at a crowded party. They were lucky no one had bumped into them, but he doubted it would last for long. Matthew blinked his dazed eyes open and seemed to come back to himself. He relaxed and bit his lip, but didn't move away from him. "Y-you wanted to talk?"

Gilbert didn't answer verbally, just took Matthew's hand and led him out of the crowd. Matthew followed easily and Gilbert considered his options. He knew that people were looking at him; it hadn't been rare for any of his friends to pick up someone at a party, but they usually didn't make out with them on the dancefloor. He hoped that Matthew didn't notice as he led them through Antonio's house and out of the back door.

It was much quieter out here, a night warm with a cool breeze. There were also few people outside and they all seemed very concerned with themselves. Gilbert headed around the corner of the house, pleased to find no one there, and turned to Matthew.

The one problem with using this spot for privacy was that there was very little light over here. It wasn't completely dark thanks to the streetlights, but that was about it. He stopped and turned to Matthew who was still holding his hand.

Matthew seemed tense and Gilbert realized that he might have made him nervous by taking him away from everyone. Gilbert cursed himself a little and squeezed Matthew hand once before letting go. Matthew's hand dropped but he could hear the confusion in his voice when he said, "Gil? What is it?"

Gilbert swallowed hard and tried to start this off right. "I...I'm not very good at subtlety, Mattie. I never have been. I like you a lot and I'm pretty sure you like me, too."

"Yes..." Matthew said, stepping a little closer to him. Gilbert couldn't read his face in the weak light, but he sounded hopeful. "I like you."

Gilbert wanted to touch him, but he resisted the urge with some difficulty. "We haven't known each other long or spent a lot of time together yet, but I want to. You're...really fucking awesome and it would be great if you could be mine."

It was quiet out here, so Gilbert heard the catch in Matthew's breath. There was a slight tremor in his voice as he asked, coming closer to him, "What would that mean, Gil?"

"It means I want you to be my boyfriend. And none of that non-exclusive bullshit that Tonio pulled with Lovino. When I say that you would be mine, I would be yours, too." When Matthew didn't say anything for a few beats, Gilbert started rambling, "I know we just met and you might not want—"

"Yes," Matthew rushed forward and hugged him. He repeated, "Yes."

Gilbert was grinning, elated, and hugged Matthew back. (*All the cuddles* was a distant thought in the back of his mind.) After a few moments, Matthew laughed and said, "I wasn't sure I heard you right. I didn't think you would want me like that, like how I wanted you."

Gilbert hugged him tighter, floored at how precious this young man was. He bent his neck a little to kiss his forehead since he could do that now and said, "How could I not?"

Matthew seemed to go still at that before saying shyly, "Hey, boyfriend?"

Gilbert huffed out a laugh. "Yes, boyfriend?"

"Can you go back to kissing me now?"

Gilbert laughed once more before doing as he asked.

Lovino was inordinately pleased with this turn of events as he backed away from Matthew. Gilbert wasn't quite glaring at him, but the look and his hold on Matthew screamed his possessiveness over his best friend. Even if this little venture did nothing to change his situation with Antonio, it might at the very least get those two together. So he smiled, put his hands up to show he wasn't going to fight Gilbert, and turned to leave...only to run right into Antonio.

Not pleased was a mild way to describe his lover's expression. He wasn't quite pissed, but he *was* angry in a way Lovino had only ever seen once that night he met Sadiq. Lovino took in

the tightened skin around his eyes, the obvious clench in his jaw, and the smallest wrinkle of his nose. “We need to talk,” he said, his voice was rough with barely contained emotion.

Lovino pushed back his shock and steeled his spine. “About what?”

“Us.” Antonio bit out and Lovino was getting angry now because *really*? Who the fuck was he to be angry about anything at his point? Was Lovino a little pleased that he was obviously jealous like Matthew had said? Yes, quite a bit, actually. But Antonio had no goddamn right to be jealous, not when *he* was the one that stated he didn’t want anything serious, anything *real*.

“Fine,” Lovino snapped at him. “Lead the way.”

Antonio looked at him for a long moment before turning and making his way through the party. He didn’t attempt to take Lovino’s hand or touch him at all, which was smarting but Lovino was determined to ignore it. He refused to hope for anything productive to come out of this conversation, had already been burned by playing with that particular flame. No, the best he could get out of this was a particularly passionate (maybe even rough for once) round of sex. The worst possibility was that Antonio would break off even this quasi-relationship.

He wrapped his anger around himself like the armor it was. He wouldn’t let himself fall apart here, so far away from any real form of privacy. He could not. He marched after him, chin held high, and kept himself from stomping like a disgruntled child, but it was a near thing.

By the time they had reached Antonio’s room and he had shut the door behind them, Lovino was shaking with rage. “What *us*, Antonio? You made it very clear when we started this there was no *us*.”

Antonio seemed to lose some of his ire as he looked away. “About that...”

Lovino stared at him. “Are you serious right now? You get jealous after I dance with my best friend *once* and that’s what it takes for you even think about this?”

“It’s not like he *just* danced with you, Lovino.” Looked like he was back to being angry. “He literally took you from my hand, touched you like he *knew* you—“

“He *does* know me. We share a room for fuck’s sake!”

“Is that all?” Antonio said lowly and he came closer to him. “Because from where I was standing, it looked like he knew to do a hell of a lot more than dance with you.”

Lovino gaped at him before laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. “Oh, my God. Matthew is an *actual* blushing virgin. We had to slow down out there because he face was burning so bad he wanted to hide it. *And* the only dick he wants belongs to your friend. But you know what? That’s so not the point right now.”

Antonio blinked, taken aback by the new information and he asked, “Then what is?”

“Even if Mattie and I were fucking like rabbits, you would have no ground to be angry with me. I *asked* you, Antonio. I literally asked you if you wanted to be exclusive and you told me

no. So what exactly do you want from me, huh? Do you want me to only sleep with you while you fuck whoever you want? Because if you want to just use me I wish you would fucking say it and stop acting like you give a damn about me so I don't—" Lovino cut himself off and turned away from him, walking to the other side of the room, hoping that would make breathing easier. *Fuck*, but he had said too much. He had said way too much.

"No, Lovino," Antonio said and his voice was gentle now. "I don't want that."

Lovino swallowed hard and kept staring at the wall, arms crossed and hands in tight fists. "Then what. Do. You. Want."

"You." Lovino flinched and that one word hurt, cut him like a million shards of glass, slicing through his emotional shield like it was nothing more than warm butter. "And not just for sex."

"Don't. Don't lie to me." He tried to bite out but his voice sounded thin and frail. *No, no no nonono. Keep it together, dammit!*

"I'm not, not anymore. I always wanted us to be exclusive. The thought of someone else touching you always burned me to my core." Antonio was moving closer to him, he could hear it, but Lovino was helpless to do anything but stand there.

Lovino squeezed his eyes shut, not letting himself believe him. "Bullshit."

"No, it's not. I thought you didn't want to label this. I thought you didn't want to commit to anyone so I told you a lie to protect myself. But I always wanted you, always cared about you." Lovino was shaking his head a little desperately. This had to be a trick of some kind, a cruel joke.

"This isn't a fucking joke, Antonio."

"Do I sound like I'm laughing, Lovino?" No, he sounded serious, no hint of cheer or jeer in his voice. "I haven't even thought of touching anyone but you since that first night. Does that sound like someone who doesn't want us to be serious?"

Lovino's eyes were stinging, his throat thick with want and control he was choking on; control he didn't want, almost couldn't bear to have anymore. He shook his head slowly and Antonio touched him, sliding his hands over Lovino's arms until he had him in his embrace. Lovino knew he was shaking, but it was all he could do not to sob. He *wanted* to believe this. He *wanted* to have this, him. But he knew he couldn't. There was just...no way.

"Do you want me like that, Lovi?" Antonio asked gently and Lovino hesitated before taking one last, stupidly hopeful breath. He nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Have you wanted me like that this entire time?" Lovino paused again but nodded, keeping his eyes down. Antonio's arms tightened around him and Lovino felt him press a kiss into his hair. "I am so sorry, *hermoso*. I had no idea. I wish I could take it back, wish I hadn't hurt you and I am so sorry I did."

Lovino struggled to swallow around the lump in his throat but managed to ask, *wanting* to believe him, “You...want me?”

“Yes, Lovino. Be my boyfriend, partner, whatever you want to call us. Let me call you mine and let me be yours.”

Lovino sucked in a lot of air and fought the tears that wanted to fall from his eyes. “You can’t mean that. No one ever means that, not with me.”

“Oh, *mi corazón*, look at me, please.” It took effort but he turned and looked at Antonio, knowing that all his emotions were there on his face. Wide emerald eyes took him in as Lovino looked for signs that he didn’t mean what he said, that this was as he feared. But there was nothing but caring and heartbreak and sadness as Antonio cupped his face gently and wiped away the tears that started sliding down his cheeks. “I mean it. What can I do to make you believe me? How could I make it up to you for what you have felt these past couple of weeks?”

He could do a lot of things, but only one flashed across Lovino's mind at that exact moment. Lovino tentatively rested a hand on Antonio’s chest and rasped out the words that had been aching to voice for weeks. “Claim me.”

Antonio froze, hands stilling their soothing movements. “What does that mean, Lovino? I want to give you exactly what you need, and for that I need you to be specific.”

“I...” He swallowed hard and tried again, trusting him with a need he had never spoken aloud before. He couldn’t say everything with his eyes open, so he closed them and began speaking. “I need you to take me, fuck me like I’m the only person you’ve ever wanted. You always make me feel good, Tonio, but you’re always so measured, so controlled that I doubt that you want me as much as I want you. I can never keep from losing parts of myself with you, but control is all you ever *have*. It never feels like you need me and, at least this once, I *need* you to need me. I want to feel you tomorrow, to feel like yours even after I go home. I... don’t want to forget that. Only then will I feel like you’re mine.”

Antonio hadn’t moved, hadn’t said a word. Lovino opened his eyes to find Antonio staring towards him from a short distance away, eyes unfocused. The relief from sharing his secret desire with someone was quickly replaced with fear that raced up his spine. It was too much for him to ask, especially from Antonio. Fuck, but he sounded pathetically needy, disgustingly *weak*. Nausea rose as his stomach dropped from what he had just done and he started to pull away, throw up a shield to catch his fall like it wasn’t too late to save himself. “Forget it. I shouldn’t—“

“You don’t know what you’re asking me to do,” He said quietly, a strange yet familiar undercurrent to his voice, more prominent than Lovino had never heard from him before. “You’ve never seen me like that, not really.”

“Then show me.” Lovino rushed to say before his insecurities overtook him. “I don’t want just the cheerful, gentle bits of you. I want all of you: that anger you only show on the field or when something bothers you, the darkness in your eyes when I get ahead of myself in bed,

the edge in your voice that you usually hide so well. I want you to take me, but I need you to give me all of you in return.”

Antonio breathed deeply and Lovino watched his eyes harden. “I am consciously generous in bed because I am not a naturally generous person, Lovino. If I didn’t fight that, make myself forget my true nature, all I would do is take from you as much as I wanted. The problem is that, with you...” Antonio stepped closer so that they were suddenly pressed together and Lovino could feel the effect of the thoughts racing through his mind. “...I want everything.”

Yes, yes, yes, yes. This was better than Lovino had ever dreamed of it being, the very manifestation of his wildest and most frequent fantasy. The sick feeling of impending doom snapped into sharp arousal and he let himself be needy and vulnerable. He stopped controlling himself the way he always did and always had done. He could only manage to speak one word: “Please.”

Lovino saw the last drop of Antonio’s resistance go as he pulled him into a harsh kiss. He ran fingers through Lovino’s hair before making a sudden fist and, oh, God, but his knees actually got weak from that small movement. He tried to gasp but opening his mouth was all the invitation Antonio needed to fucking conquer it, the hand not pulling his hair going possessively to his ass and squeezing. Lovino’s hands were trapped between him and Antonio, so the most he was able to do was grab his shirt tight as he was kissed within an inch of his life. Antonio didn’t make any sign of stopping, in fact seemed to get more and more aggressive with each passing second, and Lovino *felt* him get harder. *This* was what he had been craving. *This* is what he needed. He made a small sound in his throat that signaled his utter surrender, something that he would be embarrassed about at any other time and with any other person, and melted into his touch.

Abruptly, Antonio pulled away from him, leaving him bereft and unbalanced. Antonio steadied him and used the hand that was still in his hair to tilt his head back up so he met his burning green eyes. “You tell me to stop, and I’ll stop. But until then, I won’t. I want to make you beg and scream and cry for me, Lovino, and know that only I can do that to you. So I won’t stop fucking you until I am damn well ready, or you tell me to stop. Do you understand?”

Lovino was shaking, excitement, anticipation, and delicious apprehension flooding him. Antonio had only ever said that they made love, had never described what they did together as fucking, and the change in tone stoked his arousal to a fever pitch. He stared into his face and said, “Yes, I understand.”

Antonio released him completely and stepped back as he got out his phone. “Strip. I need to send João a message that, if he wants to sleep, he needs to find somewhere other than his room to crash.”

Lovino took a deep, steadying breath and started undoing the buttons on his shirt with trembling fingers.

Matthew had kissed other guys before Gilbert, but none of them had ever made him feel like this. He felt like he was losing himself, almost crawling out of his skin with a blinding,

unfamiliar need, uncontrollable now that he was giving into it. It was overwhelming but Matthew didn't give himself time to process. It felt too good to stop.

Matthew didn't protest as Gilbert kissed him like he was the air he needed to breathe. Maybe he had just had really bad experiences before now, but he thought that, for the first time, he understood the appeal of a French kiss. He didn't understand how the wet slide felt so intoxicating, but it was exhilarating.

It was only when his back hit a solid surface that Matthew realized Gilbert had pushed him against the side of the house, the brick unforgiving and cold. A sound he had never made before crawled out of his throat from being pressed between the building and his boyfriend, body recalling how they had been pressed against each other the night before.

He was trying to breathe through his nose, trying to take in air in those milliseconds between earthshattering kisses, but it was all too much and he was failing.

Eventually, Matthew turned his head to the side, gasping. Gilbert seemed undeterred, kissing down the side of his face and along his jaw, hands on Matthew's waist and sliding to rest on the curve of his back. Matthew instinctively tilted his head away from him, baring his neck to the boy to do with as he pleased. He slid his hands up Gilbert's back to his shoulders as he took the offered path.

His lips brushed along a spot that made Matthew jolt and forced a small sound from his throat that made him blush. "Christ, Mattie," Gilbert murmured against his skin before leaning forward to say in his ear. "You okay, baby? Can I call you that?"

You could call me damn near any pet name at this point and I would be okay with it. "Y-yeah."

"I ask because you're shaking." Matthew hadn't noticed, but he realized that Gilbert was right. Gilbert slowly ran a hand over his side and he shuddered hard, breath uneven. "You always this sensitive?"

Matthew stilled at the question, tensing, and Gilbert pulled away to look him in the eye. He was grateful for the low lighting as his face heated. Matthew lowered his eyes and said nothing. Gilbert shifted to gently move his chin until he looked up and met his eyes. "What's wrong, Matthew?" His voice was serious now and Matthew didn't want him thinking he had done something wrong. No, the problem was with him.

"I...I wouldn't know. If I'm always like this, I mean," Matthew mumbled, stumbling over his words.

Gilbert tensed now. "Has no one ever touched you?"

Matthew licked his lips, nervous, and shook his head a little. "Not like this. Is...is that a problem?"

"No, Mattie. Of course not." Gilbert kissed him briefly before asking, "Are you uncomfortable? You seemed like you liked this but—"

“I do!” Matthew assured him. “I really like you kissing me.”

Gilbert laughed, low and masculine. He leaned in and said in his ear, “And I really like kissing you. We’ll go slow, but tell me if you want don’t want anything, alright?”

“Y-yeah, okay.”

“Good.” An arc of sensation went down his spine at the word and that was worrying. “Now, I plan on hearing more those noises you make. Do you have a problem with me leaving love bites on you?”

Matthew shook his head, hands holding on to Gilbert’s shoulders to support suddenly weak knees. “N-no. Do you? Have a problem with that, I mean?” Matthew asked, turning his face towards Gilbert.

“No.” Gilbert pulled back to kiss his lips again and it didn’t take long for Matthew to once again become a mass of sensation he didn’t fully understand yet. Gilbert did slow down, but that didn’t help Matthew with controlling himself. It wasn’t like his boyfriend had been rushing through kissing him before, but now he was *taking his time*. He had been aroused before that point, but now it was distracting, embarrassingly so. He pressed his ass against the bricks behind him, trying to hide it, but Gilbert slid one of his legs between Matthew’s. He couldn’t stop the jerk of his hips or the groan of relief that escaped him at the result.

Matthew held himself still and broke the kiss to pant, “S-sorry.”

“Hmm, for what, *Liebling*?” Gilbert said, voice little more than a rumble in the dark against his skin as he moved down his jaw towards his neck. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No!” More like *absolutely not, I’ll kill something if you do*. “It’s just—I’m too—And you’re not...” Matthew’s hips moved against Gilbert’s leg again and shit, but what that an honest-to-God *whimper*?

Gilbert laughed darkly again before he pressed closer to Matthew and asked, “I’m not what?” Matthew sucked in a harsh breath as he realized that Gilbert was hard, too, *because of him*. It filled him with equal parts of elation, pride, and nerves. “Never be embarrassed about how I affect you, Mattie. I want to make you feel good and I love how beautifully you respond to me.”

Matthew’s response was to offer his neck again and sigh out, “Okay.”

Matthew shuddered as Gilbert started pressing wet kisses to his neck without further prompting, jerking again when Gilbert found that spot that made him stop before. He didn’t cease his actions this time. No, he lightly bit him before sucking at the skin and Matthew forgot to be self-conscious.

His breathing was ragged and loud in the night air. He ran his fingers through Gilbert’s hair and did his best to encourage him to stay right where he was and keep making shocks of pleasure run up his thighs and along his lower back. He was no longer really in control of

what his hips did, was only barely aware of the slow grind against Gilbert's thigh thanks to the resulting pleasure that filled him.

Gilbert's hands moved to his hips then, but he didn't stop Matthew. Instead, he shifted them so that Matthew's hips were slotted against Gilbert's, Matthew's thigh in Gilbert's hand and lifted to wrap around his waist now. Even with all of their clothes on and the fact that it *hurt*, the feeling of them together was maddening and Matthew cursed before pulling at Gilbert's hair until he was kissing his mouth again.

The kisses were messy and uncoordinated, but Matthew didn't care and it seemed like Gilbert didn't either. He knew he should slow his kissing Gilbert long enough to actually get a lungful of air, knew that the falling sensation in his head wasn't technically good, but what was air when he had this? When he felt so close to a precipice that—

"Gilbert!" Someone else called into the night and that voice was like a cold bucket of water. Matthew froze in place, suddenly aware that they were *outside* where there were *other people* who could *probably hear him*.

Gilbert stilled against him and broke their kiss but stayed close. "Fuck. I'm sorry, Mattie. I completely forgot where we were. This wasn't my intention when I—"

"War!" If Matthew thought he was tense before, he was made of stone now.

"Shit. No one calls me that this late unless there's a fight that needs to be handled. I'm *so* sorry, Matthew—"

"Gil, you're okay. *We're* okay," Matthew said soothingly, kissing his cheek and untangling himself from the boy. He straightened his clothes, worked to calm his body, and let down his hair, thinking that the bun was probably worse for wear after being pressed against the bricks. "Let's go."

Gilbert hesitated, staring at him with a torn expression, before taking his hand and heading back towards the party at a fast walk. He said, "After this, we should talk about when you're free for our first date."

Right, because he had a boyfriend now who would take him on dates and hold his hand and kiss him. And Gilbert was that boyfriend. Matthew couldn't help the wide smile that spread across his face. "Sounds good to me."

They hit the lighted areas of the backyard and Matthew saw that it was Luciano that had called for Gilbert. "What's up, Lu?" Gilbert asked, tone losing all the softness it had held only seconds before for him.

Luciano's eyes widened as he looked at Gilbert then at Matthew. He paled and visibly swallowed. "A few freshmen are making nuisances of themselves. Death's there, but they're not the most diplomatic."

Understatement. "Where's Tonio?" Gilbert asked as they entered the house.

“...extremely unavailable.” Luciano said uncomfortably before clearing his throat. Matthew *hoped* that meant that his plan had worked. He continued as they moved through the house towards the living room, “Since they’re new students, they don’t know the rules yet.” Matthew frowned in confusion. *What rules?*

Gilbert sighed. “And I’m supposed to teach them?”

“No, Death’s doing that, I think, but none of us are expecting them to believe them.”

“Enforcement, then. Which rule did they break?”

“Two of them, actually: *don’t be a creep* and *no means fucking no.*”

“Brilliant. I’m assuming there’s a girl?”

“Yeah. Her name’s Shannon. Famine’s making sure she’s okay.” The crowd was letting Gilbert, Luciano, and (by extension) Matthew through, a few older students pulling visibly confused people out of their way. The way Gilbert walked changed, shoulders squaring and steps more deliberate.

Gilbert squeezed his hand and Matthew looked up to meet his eyes. His face was hard with anger, but his expression visibly softened when Matthew looked at him. “*Liebling*, this should be quick. My threat’s only as good as my examples, so could you stay with Alistair until I’m done with them?”

Matthew frowned again. It had sounded like there were more than two people that Gilbert had to deal with and it seemed like it would come to blows. He didn’t quite understand everything that was happening, but he didn’t want to leave Gilbert in an unbalanced fight. “I could help. You know that.”

Gilbert’s mouth quirked into a smirk and his eyes seemed to fill with certainty. “I won’t need it.”

They made it to where a circle of people were standing around Alistair and it looked like three belligerent young men. The music was still playing, but the volume had been lowered to background music so Alistair didn’t have to yell as they said, “Ye can either get out on yer own or be carried out. We don’t tolerate this shite.”

“And who the fuck are you? This isn’t your house.” One of them said. Matthew looked them all over and noted that they all seemed to be flushed with some level of intoxication and were muscled, but with the kind that was just for looking pretty. There was something about the way they were dressed and an aura of entitled WASP-iness that rolled off of them that made Matthew immediately dislike them. Yeah, Gilbert wouldn’t need any help.

“Yer right, this isn’t me house. But it is me mate’s and we enforce our rules here. And me? I’m Alistair, they/them, but people call me Death.” Matthew heard the smile in their voice and knew that it wasn’t a pleasant one.

“We?” One of them flicked his eyes to see Gilbert and Matthew arrive, still holding hands and probably a little debauched from their make-out session. He scoffed and said, “What are a couple of queers going to do to us?”

It was like the entire room sucked in a hissing breath through its teeth, the people nearest to the guy that had spoken visibly backing away from him. Luciano said from behind them, “Dude, this is the *soccer team’s* party. Like, half of us are queer as fuck.”

“And I’m not goin’ ta do anythin’ ta ye. I’m just tha judge and jury. *He’s* tha executioner.” Alistair looked over to them and grinned.

Gilbert squeezed Matthew’s hand one last time before letting go and stepping forward, gesturing at the freshmen. “Alistair, you could have handled this yourself.”

They shrugged, “Yeah, but yer more efficient. Besides, I didn’t know ye were...” They focused Matthew and their face turned sly. “...Preoccupied.”

Matthew crossed his arms and glared at them as they came to stand next to him, trying to ignore the burning of his cheeks. Gilbert sighed, “Leave my boyfriend out of this.”

Matthew felt the sudden weight of a lot of people staring at him and heard not a few whispering voices. “So it’s official now! Congratulations. About damn time.”

“It’s been three—“

“What the hell did *he* mean by ‘executioner?’” One of the drunk boys said, apparently irritated by their inattention and spitefully putting stress on the wrong pronoun. Gilbert went still. “You can’t do shit to us.”

Matthew watched Gilbert’s eyes go sharp and cold enough to burn as he focused on the one who had spoken. “I dislike being interrupted, which you have done twice already tonight. You’ve broken the rules which pretty much amount to *don’t be a fucking asshole* and have just deliberately misgendered my best friend.” The closest spectators moved even further away from him as they did from the homophobic guy with almost frantic speed, one person even going so far as to cross themselves. Gilbert asked the general room, “Has someone called an ambulance yet?”

When no one answered for a beat, someone in the back of the room said, “On it, War.”

“What did that person call you?” This came from the last boy, who seemed less intoxicated than the others and had yet to speak. He was visibly wary and backing away from him a little. He was the smart one.

Gilbert looked steadily at him. “You must be new here. I’m War. Behind me is Death. Famine is somewhere comforting the girl you apparently ganged up on like animals. Pestilence lives here. Those names ring any bells?”

The smart one blanched and nodded. “My sister graduated last year. I’ve heard about you.”

“Good to know word gets around. Now, are we going to do this the easy way or the fun way?”

“I’m good,” he said, hands raised in surrender. “Won’t happen again.”

“What the fuck, Darren?” said the guy who had misgendered Alistair. “You’re really going to let him intimidate you? It’s three against one.”

“Yeah, no. I’m out,” Darren said. “He has a reputation; they all do. I’m not looking to spend the night in the hospital, thanks.”

Alistair hummed next to him, tilting their head a little in thought. “Yer sister. Is her name Erika, by chance?” Darren froze and looked at them in utter horror. Alistair nodded. “Classy woman.”

Matthew looked at them, mouth open. Darren said, obviously pained, “Oh, come on, pal. I didn’t need to know this. I’m trying to leave here. I fucked up, I get that.”

“I can see that. But, since yer walkin’ out and basic human decency seems too much fer ye ta grasp, I just wanted ta make sure this wouldn’t happen again ta some other girl. I think I still have yer sister’s number and it would be a shame fer her ta know what her wee brother’s been up ta.”

Darren sighed. “Understood.” He then looked at the other boys who were still squaring up to fight Gilbert. “You both should walk away while you can still walk.”

“Fuck off, dude. Some friend you are. Come on, Jake. We can still take him.”

“Hell, yeah.” Darren shook his head and left, pushing through the crowd and heading toward the door.

Matthew leaned in to Alistair and whispered, “Did you actually sleep with his sister?”

“Nah. She’s a lesbian but hasn’t told her family yet. We worked on a few projects together. I really liked tha way she coded,” they answered just as quietly, both of them waiting for the action to start.

Gilbert looked down his nose at both of them. “Damn. I’d been hoping for a fight.”

The one on the right, Jake, took offense to that and stepped forward to swing at Gilbert. Gilbert stepped to the side, turning his body easily so that the guy overbalanced and damn near fell to the floor. Gilbert’s expression was bored, bordering on pitying as he considered his opponents.

Not-Jake rushed Gilbert, obviously trying to tackle him. Gilbert dropped his center of gravity, grabbed him as he twisted them both, and threw him to the ground next to his friend, close to Matthew. He landed hard with a shout and groaned a little as he rolled to his back. Gilbert straightened and looked at them again. “Are you done or...?”

Jake managed to right himself and seemed to realize that this was an actual fight. He settled into a loose, sloppy stance that said that he had been taught some form of martial discipline at some point, but it was either too long ago or he was too drunk for it to be of any use. Gilbert saw this, studied the other's body, and adjusted himself.

Jake started for him first, the punches surprisingly steady considering how drunk he was. He consistently over-extended, however, leaving his foundation weak. Gilbert easily blocked his strikes and got within his guard to elbow him smoothly in the temple. With Jake dazed, Gilbert tripped him and watched impassively as he crashed to the floor.

Not-Jake had dusted himself off enough to watch this happen. Perhaps realizing that he was no match for Gilbert, he looked around, almost as if searching for an exit. When his eyes settled on Matthew, he knew that wasn't the case. He was almost standing next to him thanks to the fact that Gilbert had all but thrown him to Matthew's feet.

Gilbert turned towards Not-Jake in time to see him attempt to sucker-punch Matthew. Matthew hadn't expected it, so he wasn't as steady as he would have liked as he dodged on instinct. He moved to the side, closer to where Gilbert was. He was sure that Gilbert and maybe Alistair were moving to help him, but Matthew didn't have time to rely on them. He grounded himself as he waited a half-second as Not-Jake came to him. Then, just as he tried to gut punch him, Matthew stepped back so he would have to extend his arm farther than expected and redirected the punch to Not-Jake's opposite side with a standard block. In the next second, he grabbed his shirt at the shoulder, stepped towards him, and drove his knee into his diaphragm, loosing a small grunt of effort. As Matthew brought his leg back down and heard the *whoosh* of air leaving Not-Jake's body, he released him, turned, and snapped the heel of his hand into his ear. His shirt restricted his movements, but it didn't take a lot of force to make that shit hurt. Not-Jake tried to scream, but it only came out as a choked wheeze. He crashed to the floor.

Matthew looked down at where the boy was writhing with neutral eyes and felt a light touch at his arm. He turned his head and found Gilbert there, looking at him with a darkly pleased expression. "Nicely done, *Liebling*," he complimented as his hand came to rest on Matthew's lower back, casually intimate. Neither of them were breathing heavily, nor had they broken a sweat.

Matthew smiled at him, happier than he was comfortable with to have pleased him. "Thank you, sweetheart. Now, who's going to clean them up?"

"The EMTs. But first..." Gilbert's eyes shifted to the boy Matthew had taken down and his expression sharpened dangerously.

He went to a knee besides the guy and gripped his shirt, forcing him to meet his eyes. Not-Jake looked scared in the way most people get when they realize they can no longer breathe properly, eyes wild and mouth gaping, but Gilbert seemed unsurprised as he shook him a little. "Now, I don't know who you are." If Matthew had heard a voice like Gilbert's down a dark alley, he would have run in the opposite direction; It all but dripped violence. "But I am War. Going after that girl makes you a piece of shit. Going after my *boyfriend* makes you fucking stupid. *No one* tries to hurt him. This is your one free pass; fuck up and you won't be able to walk away with only alcohol poisoning and a headache. Go after *him* again, and you

won't be able to walk at all." Gilbert released him abruptly and he collapsed once more to the floor, breathing again but harshly, staring up at Gilbert like he was the devil himself.

Gilbert stood and Matthew heard the sounds of sirens in the distance. What he had just said should have been concerning, especially since Matthew was convinced that he wasn't bluffing in the least. But why did his words make him feel...safe? Cared for? In hockey, Matthew had always been the threat of violence to keep someone else safe. When was the last time someone offered themselves as *his* shield?

The dark intention hadn't left Gilbert's face when he turned back to look at Matthew but that didn't stop him from smiling at his boyfriend. Gilbert's edge softened perceptively, his body language completely shifting, and he was once again the boy who had asked if he was okay while kissing and frantically apologized for them moving too fast. Gilbert offered Matthew a hand and he took it without hesitation.

Gilbert looked over to Alistair as they moved towards them. Matthew was suddenly aware again that there were a hell of a lot of people in this room watching them and he blushed, ducking his head. Alistair was shaking their head at them, small smile on their face. "Feckin' menace," they said.

Gilbert laughed though Matthew didn't get the joke. At the increasingly loud sirens, the mass of people began to thin out, all talking to themselves and creating a sudden cacophony. Out the shifting crowd emerged Gilbert's blond friend. He took in the two boys still struggling to right themselves on the floor, both holding their heads for different reasons, and tsked. Looking back at them, he said with a barely discernable French accent, "Shannon's okay; her friends are with her now. That was quick, Gil."

Gilbert shrugged and pulled Matthew a bit closer to his side. Francis' eyes went to him as Gilbert said, "Had some help, actually. Francis, have you met Matthew?"

He looked *so* familiar, but, for the life of him, Matthew couldn't recall from where. "Actually, maybe I have," Francis said, holding out his hand to Matthew. "Francis Bonnefoy, he/him. I also go by Famine when the need arises."

Matthew's brow furrowed as he fought to recall *why* he knew him. He shook his hand and said, "Matthew Williams, he/him. You look familiar, too."

Francis narrowed his eyes and said, "Do you know a woman by the name of H  l  ne Jones?"

Matthew raised his eyebrows at his mother's birth name, particularly as she is known by Helena to everyone outside of her family. The sirens stopped as flashing red lights came through the front window. "I would hope so considering she's my mother."

Francis laughed and said in French, "*I think we met at a wedding a good number of years ago then. It was between my Aunt Celine...*"

"...And my Aunt Leslie." Matthew responded easily in kind, realization dawning. He and his family had attended his mother's sister's wedding about five years ago. His mother had moved to Canada for college, but most of her family lived in Paris. The wedding itself had

been in the French capital and Matthew vaguely remembered speaking (clumsily) at length with a younger version of the boy in front of him. Gilbert's hand tightened in his and two EMTs that were part of the campus service arrived.

Francis took a moment to grin fiercely at Matthew and say in English, "Hello, cousin. We'll have to catch up later. Now, if you'll excuse me." Then he turned to the EMTs and greeted them like old friends. "Ah, Alexis and Joey! Didn't know you were working for the service this semester as well, let alone on the same team."

The EMTs had a resigned, weary look on their faces, but they were relaxed as they addressed Francis as "Famine" and asked what had happened. As Francis assured them (with the back-up of a few remaining party-goers) that both of the first years had attacked Gilbert first (*how did he know that?*), Gilbert and Alistair were staring at Matthew. "Wha' did he say?" Alistair asked.

"So, it looks like Francis is my cousin by marriage?" Matthew said, just as surprised at this turn of events but relieved to know why the junior had looked so familiar the first day Matthew had arrived. He shrugged, at a loss to explain this well. "We met at our Aunts' wedding about...five years ago? Six? We don't really talk to Mom's side of the family much."

"Unbelievable," Gilbert said, shaking his head. Then he pulled Matthew's hand gently and started moving them away from the scene. "Let me walk you home?"

"Why, yes, Gilly. How kind of ye ta ask." Alistair said drolly. When Gilbert opened his mouth to answer, Alistair rolled their eyes and cracked a smile. "I'll help Francis handle this. Maybe get some more information on these two fer...insurance."

"You're the best, Scottie."

"I know tha'. Get out of here." Alistair dismissed them both with a shooing motion and smiling eyes.

"Goodnight," Matthew said, still a little lost but figuring that was an appropriate response. *What did Alistair mean by 'insurance?' Why Gilbert was given the title War was obvious... but what did Alistair do to earn their title? What threat did their version of Death present to have people give them that name?*

"Mattie?" Gilbert said quietly as they walked out the front door. When Matthew focused on him, Gilbert was hesitant. "Do you want me to walk you back to your dorm?"

"Oh. Yeah, yes, please. That would be great." Matthew smiled up at him, bumped into his side deliberately and Gilbert relaxed a little. He was nervous about having shown Matthew who he could be when pushed, was aware of how some of his words could have been taken. He hadn't been thinking about what he said, so swept away in the moment of shock, outrage, and terror when he saw that idiot go after Matthew *because of Gilbert* only to have Matthew not only handle himself but meet his gaze with a violent neutrality that was all too familiar...

And then he called him *sweetheart*.

So Gilbert didn't second guess the urge to put the fear of God in that kid over *ever* going after Matthew again. He didn't question the needs of his reptilian brain to protect his boyfriend, declare him *his* in front of so many people, or back up his claim with violence. He showed Matthew his monster, not twenty minutes after they started a relationship.

And then Matthew had *smiled* at him like he was the best thing in the world.

But he had also blushed and ducked his head the moment he seemed to remember there were a shit ton of people watching him. They hadn't had a chance to talk about comfort levels about being public, or if Matthew was okay with everyone knowing about them.

And then there was the fact he had threatened to permanently injure a student over him. Animal instinct or not, on almost any metric that was a fucking red flag and Gilbert knew it.

"Gil?"

"Hmm?" Gilbert looked at Matthew and found him frowning at him, eyes searching his face.

"Are you okay?" Matthew asked softly. He realized then that they had been walking for a few minutes already and were almost at the edge of campus. "You seem...broody?"

Gilbert huffed out a laugh and echoed, "Broody?"

Matthew pursed his lips but there was a definite curve to them. "Yeah, broody. You're thinking too much about something that's bothering you and staring moodily into a middle distance. You're brooding and are therefore broody."

"I don't brood." Matthew looked incredulous and Gilbert moved to intertwine their fingers. "...Okay, maybe I was then but it's not a regular thing."

"Would you tell me? What's wrong, I mean. If you want to?" Matthew looked away and Gilbert saw his face flush as they passed under a streetlight. Matthew was new at this, maybe didn't realize fully what had just happened. That didn't give Gilbert an excuse to not address what he had just done.

"Yeah, Mattie, of course. I, well. I'm sorry. For what happened." He said, struggling to find the words.

"You mean the fight? You have nothing to be..." Gilbert winced and Matthew trailed off, frowning again. "You don't mean the fight."

"No, I do! I'm sorry that I threw him so close to you and that he tried to hurt you because of me," Gilbert said, not wanting him to think he didn't care about that. "I mean other things, too. Like the fact that now everyone knows that we're together and we never talked about how open with our relationship we want to be. And that I basically threatened to paralyze someone if they ever went after you. Not that I wouldn't! Shit, that's not what I—listen, I just want you to know that's not who I am, that I'm not violent in that way. I'm sorry you had to see me like...that."

Matthew was quiet for what felt like an eternity, but was really only a few seconds. His voice was cautious when he finally asked, “Did you want to keep us a secret?”

“No! I didn’t and I don’t want to hide this, but I never gave you a choice and I apologize for that. D-did you?”

“Of course not. I did make out with you in the middle of a crowded party, Gil. I know you’re just being thoughtful and I appreciate it, but you really have nothing to be sorry over. Let me finish,” Matthew said quietly when Gilbert started to contradict him, steel in his voice and a demand in his face. Gilbert shut his mouth and listened. “I had an idea of what you were capable of after last night. I offered to help you in that fight before we got there and don’t mind the fact I had to defend myself. And if you think I’m mad at you for *defending me*, for trying to protect me, then you are wrong. If you think I wouldn’t do the same for you, then *you are wrong*. Is it a little fucked up? Yeah, probably. Does it mean we have to apologize for who we are? Not over this. Not to each other.”

They had drawn naturally to a stop as Matthew spoke, just outside of the light of the main campus walkways. Gilbert stared at him, saw that he meant every word, and felt something between them shift.

There was a long moment of them staring at each other before Matthew blinked and said hastily, adorably, “Sorry, I’m done.”

You. Are. Mine.

The utterly base, instinctual part of him wanted to say that to Matthew. It wanted Gilbert to seduce him, get him into privacy and claim him physically as much as he had verbally and mentally. He was still turned on from their interrupted intimacies earlier, from watching Matthew take down that guy with ease, from remembering what Matthew had felt like beneath last night as he relaxed against him and *yielded to him* over and over. And now to hear his acceptance of him, the fact that he would do the same for Gilbert...

But this wasn’t a moment to be used as an excuse to get Matthew into his bed. It felt deeper than that, the foundation for something he couldn’t understand yet, and Gilbert was more than his instincts. He stepped forward, further into Matthew’s space. He cupped his jaw gently and slowly ran a thumb over his cheek, still holding his gaze. He let the tension build until Matthew took a breath to speak, then simply said, “Thank you.”

Gilbert kissed him gently, lingering for a moment before pulling away. He tugged the hand he still held towards campus and Matthew’s dorm. Matthew stumbled but quickly regained his footing after steadying himself against Gilbert. After maybe a minute of silence and walking on the well-lit sidewalks of campus, Matthew cleared his throat, squeezed Gilbert’s hand, and asked tentatively, “About that date...?”

Gilbert grinned.

I kept mentioning how this chapter was almost done for months and now the proof is in the fast update.

There's a coda to this chapter which is just the group chat for Antonio's housemates after the party ends and suddenly sounds become a hell of a lot more distinguishable.

Long, hilarious story short, most of the Antonio's housemates found somewhere else to sleep for the night. Close to half of them were concerned for Lovino's health and another half of them were impressed by Antonio's relentlessness.

Title song lyrics: "Puppeteer" by MAX. "Tastes like heaven when our lips collide. And I'm hooked (x4). I'm strung out on you, baby. I don't bite, but I heard you might; so let me feed your appetite."

Chapter 11: Be Careful What You're Wishing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It turned out that the next time that both Matthew and Gilbert were available was the following night.

I have a date, Matthew thought that morning as he brushed his teeth before practice, using the dim light of the streetlamps outside to see at this hour as always. *I have a boyfriend. Gilbert is my boyfriend!*

The notion had him on cloud nine during his usual get up and go routine, leaving a small smile on his face as he headed for the daily transport that was available to take hockey players to and from campus. He was early and one of the first people there.

Matthew smiled in greeting to the driver. “Good morning, Mrs. Stokes.”

“Good morning, dear,” she said, blinking in some surprise but smiling back. Mrs. Stokes was a retired nurse with some relatively innocuous insomnia. Her driving scared Matthew at times and it was only recently that he learned she had learned to drive in New York City...which explained a lot of things, actually. Anyway, nearly everyone spoke her getting on and off the bus, but few people were so cheery at this time on Saturday. “Someone’s in a good mood.”

Matthew shrugged noncommittally, but he was grinning as he moved further back onto rehabilitated school bus to where he usually chose to sit by the emergency exit windows. He nodded to Berwald, the only other inhabitant that looked somewhat awake, and settled in to wait.

He was listening to music and staring out the window, his gear on the seat beside him. People began arriving more steadily, Tino smiling to him as he passed on his way to take his now customary seat opposite Berwald a few rows back. Nate wasn’t far behind him, answering Matthew’s greeting with a grunt into his travel mug full of coffee. “Late night?”

“Yes,” he grumbled as he sat on the seat across the aisle from Matthew. “Fucking Saturdays.”

Matthew hummed and decided he would give his friend time to fully wake up before trying to engage him in conversation.

A few minutes later, the bus started moving and he was subtly jamming out to “Don’t Threaten Me With A Good Time” when he felt a slight pressure on his shoulder. Matthew turned to see Nate staring at him like he had never seen him before. He took one earbud out and asked, “What? Is there something on my face?”

“There’s something on your neck,” he replied bluntly and Matthew realized he never had gotten a good look at himself that morning...and that he told Gilbert he could mark him.

Matthew blushed suddenly and turned on the camera function on his phone to see his neck. There had been a red mark when he had gotten in but... “Shit,” Matthew said softly, taking in the noticeable but not obnoxious hickey. It was a solid bruise with a couple of darker marks in small lines like...teeth. Those were bite marks. It was an obvious sign of possession and Matthew knew he should probably be appalled at the size despite giving Gilbert permission but...

Matthew took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, a pit of heat settling in his stomach at the sight. It damn near put him back in that moment, his back against the bricks, his hand holding Gilbert in place as he arched into him and—

He cleared his throat and put the phone down. He looked at Nate who was openly gaping at him now. “You, um. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about concealer, would you?”

“No. You can probably ask someone at the store.” He said absently before shaking his head. “I think I know why you’re in such a good mood.”

Matthew allowed himself a small smirk. “I had a good night. And I *really* need to invest in some make up skills.” For all that Matthew was enjoying being marked like this, as *Gilbert’s*, he didn’t want to walk around looking like a chew toy. He could have his cake and eat it too...Lovino would know. The question was when his best friend would extract himself from Antonio’s bed.

He shot him a text just in case.

Matthew: Lovi, I need to know how to conceal a love bite. What do I do?

“Congratulations?” Nate said wryly before shaking his head again. “Be prepared for a lot of teasing when everyone else notices.”

Matthew blanched and automatically brought a hand up to cover the bite, causing Nate to smile into his mug. “Fuck.”

His team was treating him as part of it now...but that meant he gained what ranged from a bunch friendly acquaintances to annoying older brothers. Oh, God, they were never going to let this pass. Hell, the only reason no one had likely said anything up to this point was the fact that very few people had woken up all the way.

Fuck.

Well, he’d better get used to it now. It’s not like he was going to stop himself from doing... whatever he and Gilbert wanted just because of his team. Then again...none of them knew he was gay. Well, mostly gay if Lovino’s continued confusion over his singular attraction to Gilbert meant anything. He hadn’t gotten any vibes that the fact would be a problem but you never knew.

“Hey,” Nate said a little worriedly and Matthew focused back on him to see him frowning. “What’s wrong?”

Matthew opened his mouth to tell him only to stop and look around uncomfortably. He gestured to his phone and went to text him, only to see that Lovino had responded.

Lovino: about time

Lovino: I got you. Will text when I wake up

Lovino: we gotta go shopping

Matthew stared at the texts. It was damn near 6 am. He was almost afraid to ask but...

Matthew: Are you just now getting to sleep?

Lovino: yeah shut up. Will talk later

Matthew shook his head, pretty sure he was happy for his friend rather than concerned. Hopefully those two got their shit figured out. He opened a message to Nate.

Matthew: Any known homophobes on the team?

He nervously watched Nate receive and read the text. They hadn't talked about stuff like this but now it seemed pertinent.

Nate raised his eyebrows at him when he looked up but sobered when he saw the look on Matthew's face. Serious now, he looked down and typed out a text.

Nate: None that are vocal. Berwald and Matthias at least would also have your back if someone said something about that.

Matthew's shoulders slumped and he smiled at Nate. "Okay, thanks."

"Of course, Matthew. I take it that you're expecting this to be a regular thing." He nodded to his neck.

Matthew was back to smiling to himself. "Yeah. It's a relationship thing. I'm pretty happy about it. But what about you? What'd you do last night?"

"Nothing quite as exciting. Went downtown with some friends. Explored a little."

They chatted quietly on the way to the rink as Nate sipped desperately at his coffee, people slowly waking up and raising the noise level on the shuttle. Matthew was surprised that it took until they were walking into the rink for someone besides Nate to say something about his neck.

In Tino's defense, he probably was just being friendly.

"Um, Matthew?" he asked softly, sounding mildly concerned. At Matthew's glance he continued, looking slightly embarrassed, with, "You, um. Know you have a bruise on your neck, yes?"

Matthew's face colored again and he said quietly, "Yeah, Nate pointed it out. I didn't expect it to be this large."

"Oh. Okay," Tino said, clearly not wanting to push but another freshman, Frederick, saw him and smirked. *Here we go.*

"Seems like Williams got some!" he said, voiced pitched to carry. It was a friendly tease; Frederick had never personally participated in the bullying of him prior to last Monday. The man, boyish for all he was a couple years older than Matthew, nudged his arm. "Looks like you got yourself a wild one. Who's the girl?"

Matthew felt a lot of people looking at him again and he ducked his head, moving forward and thinking furiously about what to say. "Umm..."

"What?" Frederick asked and his voice was tilted away from Matthew. He looked up to see a sophomore, Jonathan, urgently signaling to Frederick, *stop talking*. He caught Matthew's gaze and smiled sheepishly at him. *Weird*. "What do you know that I don't?"

"You need to get on the campus media sites, Schmidt," Matthias said, pitying look on his face and hand clapping the man's shoulder. ...*What's that supposed to mean?* "You know who War is?"

Matthew literally stopped in his tracks, causing Nate to run into him. Matthew was barely aware of catching himself because *WHAT?* Matthias shook his head at him, smiling wryly like he couldn't believe this either, and Frederick said, "War's not a person? I mean, unless you're talking about gods and biblical figures."

Matthew absently apologized to Nate as they walked into the locker room, trying to ignore what the centre was saying as he took his usual spot on the bench. Unfortunately, the fact that sound carried in the locker room worked against him this time. "The Horseman. Well, our lovely university has our own version of the Four ...Does any other freshmen not know this? It's basically a campus legend at this point."

"Matthew?" Nate asked, beside him and quiet, clearly checking on him. He shook his head, embarrassed and starting to get angry. How the *fuck* did Matthias and, hell, anyone past first year apparently, know about him and Gilbert? Sure, he didn't want them to be a secret but he still expected some level of *privacy*.

Maybe this is what Gilbert was worried about last night. None of this made him regret what had happened and he wouldn't have wanted to *not* be with Gilbert last night in the middle of that crowd. Maybe this was the price to pay for dating someone who was apparently a campus celebrity.

Still sucked though.

Matthias continued after some first years indicated their ignorance about Gilbert and company. Over the din of everyone preparing for practice, he explained. "We all know a few people who like to work hard and play harder. These four took it to a new extreme last year

and they brought everyone around them along for the ride. But it was only fun and games until someone got hurt.

“The first time they shut down a party was last Halloween. No one knows exactly what happened and the people who do aren’t talking, but the best guess is that one of them came across someone being assaulted and immediately spoke up about it. That caused a scene that got the other three over to them and they ended up...forcibly escorting a couple of senior frat guys out of their own house. The other brothers protested and their reaction was to literally cut the music and throw the drinks out into the grass, all the while telling them they were worthless excuses for human beings for being complicit. It ended the party and was pretty fucking epic.”

“Why didn’t they stop them? An entire house of brothers against four guys?” someone asked, confused.

“You’re kidding,” someone else said.

Matthias laughed, lapping up the attention. “This was just the tipping point for changing perceptions of them; all four were already people you didn’t fuck with individually if not together, even as sophomores. Francis Bonnefoy, *Famine*, knows pretty much everyone and was an old-fashioned libertine until he started dating his current girlfriend, but that really only stopped him from literally charming the pants off of people. Francis can connect you with damn near anyone on campus, but he can also ruin you. He had already made a couple of people effectively social pariahs at that point for something secret but most likely deserved. None of them do anything without provocation.

“Antonio Fernández Carriedo, *Pestilence*, has *other* kinds of connections, the type that helps someone find a feeling, if you catch my meaning. He has to know just about everyone’s reputation in order to be effective. He also is the one that actively studies poisons. Tonio is pretty easy going and super friendly, but God help you if he ever actually gets angry at you. He’s fucking *relentless*.”

Matthew had the thought that he helped push Antonio last night and remembered that Lovino was only just now getting to sleep. He winced and began to be distracted by how much what Matthias was saying started bothering him. He couldn’t say what exactly was rubbing him the wrong way, but it was.

As Matthew was jerkily putting on his padding, increasingly irritated, Matthias continued. “Now, Alistair Kirkland? Death? No one fucks with them. *Ever*. They are a certified genius at computers and has this way of looking at you like they see all your faults and is unimpressed. If they don’t like a rule, they won’t follow it, period. Whatever information on someone Francis can’t tell you, Alistair will find it within an hour.”

“Stop,” Matthew said, hand gripping his locker door hard enough mottle his knuckles, but it was too quiet for most to hear over everything else happening. Nate stilled though, looking at him again with some concern.

“That, and they can kick your ass, without question. Still, they have the best music and a way of wiring the sound system that makes you *feel* it. Honest to God, more people have gotten

laid thanks to their playlists than anything else on this fucking campus.”

Matthew was cringing and cringing hard now at how Matthias was talking about them, about all of them. It was like they weren't just students like them, like they weren't *people* but just stories, myths to be believed, separate from reality. But they *were* just young adults. Alistair was his friend, a good one, not some monster in the dark. Antonio was a guy who was probably half in love with his best friend and, for all that it hurt Lovino with things so uncertain, really did treat him right. Matthew was still going to kick his ass if he fucked up again or if they hadn't work things out *properly* the night before, but he was otherwise okay. And Francis was his cousin! He didn't know him well now, but he had been kind to him those years ago when Matthew was awkward and stuttering in a language he understood but barely spoke with confidence. Francis had tried to meet him halfway. He couldn't recall what they had said for the life of him, but he did remember that much.

And then there was Gilbert.

“That brings me to War.”

He couldn't listen to this. “Denson, stop. Just fucking stop.”

There was a beat of silence in the locker room as everyone paused at Matthew's snapped words. “It doesn't seem fair for them to only know about three of them, Williams,” Matthias drawled from across the room and goddamn, Matthew was angry. There were some mumbles of agreement which did not help his mood. “Especially considering they will likely be seeing more of him, thanks to you.”

“They're people. *People*. Not characters in a book. Have you even *talked* to Alistair? For more than five minutes?”

“Have *you*?”

“Yes, because they're my *friend*!” Matthew slammed his locker shut, ready for practice and utterly pissed.

“...I'm actually more surprised that you're friends with Death than that you're fucking War.” Matthew was speechless. “*Anyway*, Gilbert Bielschmidt, War and Williams' new boyfriend, is the *best* at drinking games and has an iron stomach, I swear. He gets his name from the fact he's probably the best hand-to-hand fighter on campus. After he hospitalized a few people, fights just stopped when he walked up to them. Listen, I like Gil, he's good people, but the man is pure destructive energy.”

Matthew picked up his hockey stick and turned with somewhat murderous intent. Nate caught him by the shoulders and said, “You can't be a lawyer if you've been convicted of murder.”

Damn.

Tino was looking at him now, pausing as he laced up his skates. “Matthias, maybe you *should* —“

“So, trying to stop one of them would have been ill advised. Going against *all* of them wasn’t happening, not after War casually twisted on guy’s arm before calmly dumping a bottle of liquor down a sink. They kept the names because they have a pretty lax set of rules for any party they’re at and have shut some fucked up shit down when those rules were broken. Considering those rules amount to having basic human decency with an emphasis of don’t rape anyone, people don’t really protest if there’s a bad night.”

Frederick, ready now for practice, looked down Matthew’s row and saw that Nate was holding him in place. He seemed perturbed. “You don’t care that your boyfriend puts people in hospitals in his free time?”

Voice cold from impotent anger, Matthew said, “I’ve done worse.” He took a deep breath and tried to exhale some of his anger. He then shrugged off Nate’s hands and stalked forward as much as he was able, catching Matthias as he headed towards the door, ignoring the look of alarm on Frederick’s face. “How did you know? How does *everyone* know?”

Matthias lifted his brows at him, waving him forward to go first through the door in what was probably meant to be a friendly gesture. Matthew stood still, glaring, and the centre had the audacity to roll his eyes. “You mean about the fact that you’re his?”

“I’m not a fucking *possession*,” Matthew snarled and stepped forward only for Berwald to suddenly be in front of him. It was one thing for Matthew to internally revel in Gilbert’s claim on him, but that felt personal, private. The way that Matthias said that, like it was a throwaway statement, a foregone conclusion that Gilbert *owned him*, corrupted something that otherwise made him giddy.

“Matthew,” was all he said and that one word was a reminder that he had to control himself, that this was so not the place. He clinched his jaw and nodded at the junior. There was a small twitch of the corner of Berwald’s mouth, his version of showing amused appreciation, before he turned cold eyes to Matthias. “Are you tryin’ to get yourself injured before the season starts?”

Matthew looked around Matthias and saw him straighten a look of surprise on his face. “Of course not.”

“Then stop pushing Matthew and start warming up.”

“But I didn’t do—“

“Now.” Berwald didn’t have to raise his voice, but there was no question that Matthias would do as he asked. Matthew hadn’t really questioned why their coach had picked Berwald to lead the team despite there being older members of the team, but now he didn’t doubt that it was his calm command, so useful in a sport like this.

Matthias went, grumbling and the rest of the team filed out, the topic all but dead. Berwald stayed next to Matthew as they went and answered his previous question. “There are a couple communal gossip forums on campus. I’m not sure how people figured it out, but someone connected seein’ you at a party last night with the hockey video.”

Matthew winced. *That damned video strikes again.* They had only been dating for six hours at the most and people already figured it out? “Fucking hell. Don’t people have *lives*?”

“Well,” Jonathan started tentatively behind him and Matthew turned to him. The man grimaced and said, “Rumor is he threatened to kill anyone that hurt his boyfriend. People wanted to know who to avoid. War—sorry, Gilbert, he has a really bad reputation for being... efficient.”

“That’s ridiculous! He didn’t threaten to kill anyone!”

Go after him again, and you won’t be able to walk at all.

He was splitting hairs and knew it. For all that he and Gilbert had talked about it last night, this conversation was an unwelcome reminder that they were more comfortable with violence than most people. Still, the technicality mattered.

“Mattie,” Tino started, as they approached the ice. “Would he really go after someone who tried to hurt you?”

“Most likely, though only after I was through with them.” That had a few people turning to look at him, surprised, but Nate was unperturbed and kept moving beside Matthew to get settled and onto the ice. Tino looked nonplussed but blinked it away and smiled at him before doing the same.

“Why are you surprised?” came the unexpected and chilling voice of Ivan Braginski. Matthew was shocked to his core at his interjection, saw him tilting his head a little to the side and looking at the people who seemed uncomfortable with Matthew’s admission—apparently violence off the ice was frowned upon. “What kind of person do you think a man like Gilbert Beilschmidt would willingly and publically tie himself to?”

That...was a good point actually. Matthew realized that the first time Gilbert had seen him after they met was while he was beating his frustrations into a punching bag. And the first time Gilbert had texted him was after he had seen the hockey video. And the second time they had intentionally met in person...okay, the coffee and sparring were kind of pseudo-dates. But the second time they had met, they literally fought and God, but the way Gilbert had *looked* at him that night...

For all that they talked during coffee and over texts, Matthew had unintentionally proved to him he was more than capable of handling Gilbert’s physicality. The realization started to bother him, having felt like he had passed some sort of test just to date his boyfriend, but then he remembered all the other things about Gilbert that Matthias had failed to mention. War wouldn’t have given him a choice as to how he could help him during an upsetting conversation. War wouldn’t quote kids movies or struggle to find the right words as he asked him out. War wouldn’t have volunteered to go slow with him or let that heavy moment they’d had they headed to his dorm pass without taking advantage of it.

But Gilbert did. For all that Gilbert no doubt had the capacity to be all that Matthias had said and Ivan implied, it would never be all that he was. And yeah, Matthew had a resting potential for violence that kept him from balking at physical confrontations when necessary,

but he would bet that it wasn't his fighting ability that had Gilbert threatening people, trying to protect him.

So Matthew smiled at them and glided onto the ice. Some stranger had effectively outed him to the entire school. He would have to deal with that later, but he should be comfortable here, with his team at the very least. They had a game in six days, after all. Surely they could focus on that for the duration of the day. Hell, that reminder was enough to end any serious urges he had to throttle Matthias.

That said, he would be investigating his concealer options the second Lovino got moving for the day, if only to keep people from staring at his neck at odd moments. Maybe they had makeup that would stay on during sports?

Mattie: Hey, so fair warning, looks like people already know about us.

Gilbert stared at his phone from where he lay in bed, not understanding the text that came through. Matthew had probably just gotten back from practice and it was still early, just after 8:30. What the hell?

Gilbert: ? ? ?

Gilbert: just woke up what happened?

Mattie: People take your threats seriously. They seem to think you're very dangerous.

Gilbert raised his eyebrows. Threat...oh. Yeah, that. *Fuck.*

Gilbert: ...well I kinda am

Mattie: Not to me.

Gilbert: No baby not to you

Gilbert: your virtue however...

Mattie: omg

Mattie: *face palm*

Gilbert: you don't believe me?

Mattie: oh no, I believe you

Attached to that message was a picture of what had to be Matthew's neck, jaw tilted up and finger pointing to a rather pronounced mark on his skin. Gilbert...hadn't been entirely in control of himself when he had sucked and bit that mark onto him. In fact, he had been entirely engrossed in drawing more of those startled, *wanting* noises from Matthew, in making his new boyfriend familiar with losing himself to Gilbert's touch.

The right thing to do here would probably be to apologize for making the mark so big, for forgetting himself like that with a boy he knew to be inexperienced and absolutely did not want to hurt. But...that wouldn't be true and Gilbert didn't want to live a lie, not again.

Gilbert: are you upset about that?

It took a few moments for Matthew to respond, so Gilbert began the process of forcing himself to be presentable for the day; he had a club meeting to run soon and then work after that. While he was brushing his teeth, Matthew answered him.

Mattie: No, I'm not.

Gilbert: then I'm not sorry. It's a good look on you

Mattie: smh

Mattie: you know I'm looking up concealers right now?

Gilbert smiled, pleased because that signaled he was likely going to continue being okay with Gilbert marking him as long as he could cover it up during the day. That was fair enough; having your neck covered in hickeys wasn't exactly professional.

Gilbert: seems like a wise investment

Mattie: my teammates certainly think so

Mattie: I still don't get how people figured out we were together and somehow spread it to at least most of my teammates in just a few hours

Gilbert: ...what?

Mattie: something about campus gossip sites. I didn't really ask for details, but someone connected last night to the hockey video which is still in the ether apparently.

Mattie: actually, you might want to do something about the site since they're saying you threatened to kill people over me.

What the *fuck*. Okay, this was unacceptable, and not only for the facts that people embellished his threat and most definitely took it out of context.

Gilbert: fuck Matthew I'm sorry I didn't think this through

Gilbert: are you okay?

Mattie: yeah, mostly. You know I don't want to hide us but this feels...invasive?

Mattie: Like I hate how people talk about you and your friends and how someone I don't know basically outed me and you to the entire school. That's personal and I hadn't mentioned to anyone on the team that I'm gay until this morning and THAT had been my choice to tell a friend.

Mattie: And the video! Again with the video!

Mattie: but I wouldn't do any part of last night differently so I don't really know where that puts me

Gilbert: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I didn't think this would happen. Is there anything you need rn?

Mattie: Gil, this isn't your fault and I'm not mad at you.

Gilbert: yeah but its kinda happening because of me and who I am

Mattie: I told you I wanted to be by your side last night during the fight and this doesn't change that

Mattie: and I happen to like who you are

Mattie: and the only thing I need from you right now is to know when and where to meet you this afternoon

Gilbert stared at the messages, thunderstruck. Them not hiding their relationship was so very different than what he was experiencing, but he was just dealing with it, not questioning *once* that being with Gilbert was worth it. How was Matthew so...Matthew? So adorable? Strong and sexy and caring and—

Gilbert was in trouble. Oh, he was in so much trouble. *Honey, you've got a big storm coming*, Alistair had warned him the day before Matthew had texted him. How right they were.

Gilbert: how about 4:30? I can pick you up in front of the library since it's one of the few places with a parking lot.

Mattie: you have a car?

Gilbert: no I have a motorcycle. Ludwig uses the car our uncle left us when he died. If you're not comfortable on a bike I can ask him if I can borrow it?

Matthew's answer was slow in coming this time, too, so Gilbert straightened from where he had leaned against the sink as he texted Matthew and resumed getting ready.

He was dressed and heading downstairs when Matthew got back to him.

Mattie: No the bike is fine. I've never ridden before but I've always wanted to.

Gilbert: Don't worry, my bike is easy to ride and I'm always careful

Mattie: I trust you

Mattie: btw I just told Ludwig that we're a thing. Not really sure how he's going to react when he reads it

Mattie: I didn't want him to find out before we could tell him

Gilbert: okay I'll be on the lookout. Thanks Liebling.

Mattie: what does that mean?

Gilbert: darling

Mattie: ...is it bad that I really want to kiss you rn?

Mattie: don't answer that

Mattie: see you at 4:30 sweetheart

Gilbert answered anyway.

Gilbert: if it helps, the desire is mutual

Mattie: it really doesn't

Gilbert: *kiss* *wink* *heart eyes*

Gilbert walked into the kitchen unconsciously grinning at his phone and Ludwig greeted him, "Good morning, Gilbert."

Gilbert turned his smile on his brother, whose entire expression was one of the long suffering, before turning to the coffee maker. "Morning, West."

"I take it your mood is related to the fact that you and Matthew are dating."

"Matthew's my *boyfriend*. Can you blame me?"

"No, I cannot." Ludwig sighed and said, "You two seem to make each other happy and what more could I want for my brother and my friend."

Gilbert turned to face him, surprised at the sentiment and touched. "Love you, too, Ludwig."

"Just...I would really prefer that I never walk in on you two doing *anything*. Ever."

"I'll do my best," Gilbert said, smirking as he got the machine going.

"...You are going to be one of *those* couples then. God save us all."

"Aw, now that's not fair. If you have so little faith in me do you really think that if Matthew and I were ever hooking up that he wouldn't be mortified by the possibility of you walking in?" The question was a bit of a red herring since Gilbert had the tiniest suspicion after Matthew's reactions to, well, everything that he might end up being into some not-vanilla things.

Before he could let his mind follow that train of thought into *not helpful* territory, Gilbert continued. "Head's up: there's a rumor going around that I threatened death to anyone that

hurts Matthew—“

“What the *hell*, East!”

“—but the truth has been greatly exaggerated. Someone angry at me took a swing at Matthew last night after I stated that he was my boyfriend. Matthew laid him out because he’s awesome, but to say I was unamused would be an understatement. I didn’t *actually* threaten to kill the guy, only hurt him very badly if he went after Matthew again for any reason. Speaking of which.”

Gilbert picked up his phone as Ludwig said, “What an idiot. What kind of person would look at Matthew and want to hurt him?”

“A disrespectful, drunk asshole who previously tried to pressure a girl into sex with him and two of his friends.”

“...Your actions seem perfectly reasonable to me,” Ludwig said, disgust clear in his voice and Gilbert started sending texts.

Gilbert: hey Scottie. I know I’ll see you in like 10 mins but two things

Gilbert: 1 thank you for helping get me and Mattie together

Gilbert: 2 someone connected the dots on who he was after last night and posted it online. Apparently it has made the rounds enough that Matthew came to the very unpleasant realization that nearly everyone on his team found out he was queer without his permission. You know how private he is

Gilbert: there’s also the little thing that they upped my threat from a pointed one of severe injury aimed at one guy to killing anyone who hurts him

Scottie: wtf it’s too early for this shit

Scottie: 1 you’re welcome

Scottie: 2 I’ll handle it

Scottie: can you run the mtg w/o me? I want to take care of this now

Gilbert: you know you don’t have to but I’d really appreciate it

Scottie: shut up

Scottie: none of what you said is allowed. You and Mattie are mine

Scottie: ducking autocorrect. *my. My people

Scottie: No one gets to fuck with you like this

Scottie: you’d do the same for me

Gilbert: of course

Gilbert: I can muddle along without you today I guess. Will miss you tho

Scottie: sap

Gilbert shook his head as he sipped almost frantically at his cup of coffee. He had lost track of time texting Matthew and was going to be late. Well, late for him. He might not make it until everyone else arrived.

He had an actual meeting planned today, when they were going to warm up as a group and Gilbert would make them practice falling before releasing them to spar with partners. Most people were very familiar with the concept, but some martial disciplines didn't focus on more practical elements of fighting and the club didn't bar people with little to no experience. Gilbert usually relied on Alistair to help him demonstrate something, them knowing each other so well that they rarely had to speak to coordinate movements. But falling was something Gilbert could do on his own.

Gilbert's phone buzzed and he was surprised to see a message from Francis in the group chat.

F: Everyone knows about your relationship W and I'm doing damage control on a few more disturbing rumors. D filled me in on what I missed last night.

F: Apparently Matthew damn near fought Matthias again this morning

F: over us. All of us.

D: what

W: what

F: no quotes per se but he took issue with how Matthias talked about all of us

F: started yelling after he talked about D

F: made moves to actually go after him after W

F: Berwald had to step in. Matthias doesn't think he did anything wrong

F: you both see him pretty regularly. Might want to check in with him.

W: I talked to him already about people knowing this morning

W: ...he mentioned something about how people talk about us no details tho

W: nothing about Matthias

F: wait a second

F: oh good LORD

D: ??? what now

F: got a rundown the conversation from a different informant

F: athletes are the biggest gossips I s2g

F: ...Matthew's a good person W don't mess this up

W: what did he say

F: summary of Halloween

F: he said that was the start of our names but I'm not too sure about that

F: described me, then P. Matthew was pretty irritated

F: you know what, he's just M now

F: described D, M yelled at him for talking about us like we weren't normal people with who existed outside of our titles

F: fucking hell

F: "more impressed you're friends with death than that you're fucking war"

Gilbert actually saw red at the casual belittling of their relationship and subtle jab at Alistair. They tended to keep to themselves because, for one reason or another, very few people had ever been interested in getting to know them rather than using Alistair for their talent. Their wariness of people was fucking *earned*. His hand tightened on his phone and expression hardened enough that Ludwig offered a tentative, "East? Are you all right?"

F: M's partner had to restrain him after he talked about W

F: Berwald stopped him after M felt the need to say that he wasn't W's property

My PROPERTY?! What the ACTUAL fuck?

F: Matthias really thought he was being friendly, didn't get why M was so upset

F: M also said something that terrified a good quarter of the team but not much on that
"Gilbert?"

"People," Gilbert started, trying to think past the anger (at Matthias and people who thought like him), guilt (that Matthew had to deal with this because of Gilbert), and admiration (for Matthew, of course) that choked him. "Are giving. Matthew hell. Because we're together."

"But it is still early. Matthew has not had time to go—practice. His team, then?"

"Yes," Gilbert hissed, only to curse as he looked at the time. "I have to go. I'll be back for a bit after work."

“Have a nice day,” Ludwig said as Gilbert strode from the kitchen, distractedly picking up his shoulder bag waiting for him by the couch as typical for Saturday mornings.

“Have fun today,” Gilbert called back, not in reference to anything specific but because sometimes he felt the need to remind his brother that fun was a thing he should have every so often. As he walked into the garage and towards his bike, a black Vulcan that was a few years old, he checked his phone again.

D: Mattie is good people

D: a wonderful menace

D: who must be protected

F: cinnamon roll

F: too good for this world

F: too pure

D: one that can kill you tho

F: Killer cinnamon roll

F: KCR

W: let's stick with M for now

W: I'll handle Matthias

D: doesn't sound like a good idea

W: what

D: hockey is M's thing and he can handle himself

D: he probably didn't mention the conversation for a reason

W: shit youre right

W: thanks for the save <3

D: *rolls eyes*

F: ...that's surprisingly insightful for you

D: shut up

D: I don't understand most people but I get you three and I get M

F: just how often do you see him

D: couple times a week why?

D: ffs

D: I didn't change my habits just because you moved off campus, F. unlimited coffee is still free for me in the cafeteria

F: *rolls eyes* I wasn't implying anything nefarious THIS time

F: one: you don't swing his way

F: two: you all but physically threw him at W

F: three: you know I don't exactly have any accessible family here and as tenuous our connection he is my cousin. I'm trying to figure out how to get to know him.

F: how did this even happen

D: blame P

F: ? ?

D: he and Vargas don't always make it to his place

D: now leave me alone. I have sources to track down, lives to ruin

F: lovely

W: thanks you two

D: ugh

F: anytime W

Gilbert was well on his way to being truly late, but he turned his phone off when he was driving and Alistair had probably saved his ass from making a huge mistake not 12 hours he and Matthew started dating, so he wanted to see the conversation through. It was a close call and for this and everything else related to Matthew he owed them a very good bottle of scotch. He would have to start putting funds aside; their birthday was coming up anyway.

Gilbert powered down his phone and settled in to get on with his day, mind filled with the conversations he had just had and body buzzing with anticipation for later.

Lovino woke up slowly, begrudgingly as he felt the press of someone's lips to his shoulder and neck. Only one person that could be. He didn't bother opening his eyes as he minutely shifted his body backwards to press against the solid line of heat behind him. He felt an insistent presence against his backside and he groaned lightly. *Oh, God, again?!*

His body was registering very particular kinds of aches and his exhausted mind shied away from even the thought of having sex again. Of course, his dick had other plans and he wanted to curse his body for betraying him so, for being disturbingly responsive to the boy pressed against him. “Tonio, sleep,” he managed, trying to telegraph *hold me* instead of *fuck me*.

He hummed against Lovino’s skin, a considering noise that had his hormones sitting up and taking notice. “I don’t want to sleep right now, *hermoso*,” he said smoothly but with that undercurrent of dark pleasures, using the arm he had draped over Lovino’s waist to hold him closer. Antonio had taken the time last night to translate every one of his endearments into English for Lovino and boy, did that change how Lovino understood the past two weeks.

...They could sleep later. “Insatiable bastard,” he grumbled, rolling his hips against him lazily and moving the hand on his stomach down to his fast-filling cock.

Antonio made a pleased sound that was so low it was almost subsonic. “Only for you,” he said and that statement reminded Lovino forcibly of their change in status, obliterated any resistance he would have had for this. “Are you sore? Did I hurt you?”

“Yes, but no,” Lovino said, turning his head towards him, seeking a kiss that Antonio eagerly gave him. Yes, Antonio had been just as unyielding as he had warned through the night, wringing sounds from Lovino that he had never heard from *anyone* before, let alone from himself. His need to claim him—and it was a need, Lovino had realized in the middle of it—worked with his fear of hurting him and desire to make up for what he had put Lovino through. Of course he’d turned being thorough in preparation into its own form of torment, but warning spikes of pain were not shooting up Lovino’s spine as he moved against him in blatant invitation. He broke the kiss and opened heavy lids to see the hunger in Antonio’s face. “I’m yours. Take me, *tato*.”

Like the first time Lovino had used the meaningless endearment last night, Antonio paused in shock before his hands became insistent and searching, mouth domineering and territorial over his mouth. Lovino melted into him and gave himself to his boyfriend.

His *boyfriend*.

Antonio didn’t have to leave from his spot against him as he groped around the bed for the lubricant. He broke the kiss and said, “Don’t move, Lovino. I want you just like this.”

Lovino was more than fine with that, realizing what he intended. He relaxed back into the bed again and closed his eyes, damn near falling asleep again. The cool touch of a lubricated finger against his entrance pulled him back to wakefulness, but only so much. He made soft, sleepy noises as he kept his eyes closed and rocked back into the hand preparing him, arched his neck into the mouth kissing his skin.

The sex had an almost dream-like quality to it, slow and gentle and lazy with sleep. Everything about it was subdued, which was exactly what Lovino needed after how demanding the night before had been, both physically and emotionally. This time, when Antonio pushed into him, bare after their conversation last night, it felt like he was the only thing keeping Lovino together rather than the very instrument of his destruction.

When it was over and Antonio ended the kiss that had swallowed Lovino's orgasmic whimpers, the only thing Lovino wanted to do was go right back to sleep. Unfortunately, this was real life and not some magical porn universe where sex, particularly unprotected sex, didn't require near-immediate clean up. Lovino allowed himself a couple of minutes of cuddling against him, the afterglow made all the more pleasurable by the fact Antonio was still pressed inside him. Eventually, however, he started feeling sticky and the fact that he was resting in a wet spot was increasingly apparent.

"Shower?" he asked reluctantly.

Antonio sighed. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea." Lovino shuddered as he pulled out, Antonio rubbing a soothing hand down his side. He finally opened his eyes more fully to actually register the room, taking in the bright light from the window that signaled it was close to midday. Lovino groaned at the light and the realization that he should probably actually get up for the day rather than go back to bed with Antonio.

"Lovi?" Antonio started, sitting up now and hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He pushed himself up and whoa, okay. Spoke too soon. "*Fuck.*"

"Lovino—"

"It's my back, I'm fine." It was also his ass and thighs but hey, who's counting? Okay, Antonio was but he didn't want to alarm him because he wanted last night to happen again... just not anytime soon. In his own defense, his back was the only thing that *hurt* rather than just being really, really sore. "If you want to fuck anytime in the next three days, you're going to have to take me. My body needs a break."

Lovino grit his teeth and kept moving, but Antonio said, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I mean I won't be sitting upright for a while but that's nothing." Lovino made it to his feet and, in an effort to ease *something* in his back, forced himself to stretch really far upwards before folding himself over, arms wrapped around his legs and pulling his chest to his thighs. Yeah, no those cracks were not ideal, but it did make him feel a little better as he stood normally.

"You know," Antonio said as he stayed where he was in bed, watching Lovino but also signaling he could use the bathroom first...like there weren't four other bathrooms in this house. "I actually don't mind bottoming. You're just a bottom."

Lovino paused as he was reaching to grab one of the clean towels from Antonio's dresser and looked over at him. "Excuse me?"

"There's nothing wrong with that, of course," Antonio rushed to say, getting up and reading Lovino's tone of warning correctly. "You know I wouldn't change a thing about you in bed. I only say that because you've never once hinted that you wanted to top me. Well, that and a few other things."

“Enlighten me,” Lovino said, fully facing him now as he approached him, arms crossed. He wasn’t even sure why he was so resistant to the idea since he fucking *loved* having Antonio fuck him for a lot of reasons. The physical pleasure was definitely there, but he craved that kind of sustained attention, the knowledge that someone he desired *wanted* him in return, and the care that Antonio showed him, even at his most out of control. Why would he ever not choose to have that?

Weak. Needy. Passive. Dependent. Bottom, his mind spitefully supplied.

Oh.

That was super fucked up. What the hell?

The anger drained out of him, causing his shoulders to slump and his eyes to drop to the floor, embarrassed and internally appalled at himself. God, how the fuck could he still think that way after so many years of knowing he was bi? So many years of defending his attraction to men from being just another excuse for his family to look down on him? Of course he’d been combative enough that Feliciano hadn’t gotten the same reaction, but Lovino wouldn’t wish that on anyone, let alone his brother. Those words were exactly how his grandfather would have described him. How the fuck did that still *matter* to him?

“Lovi?” Antonio was in front of him now, hands holding his arms gently. “Are you upset?”

Lovino sighed and uncrossed his arms to rest his hands on Antonio’s chest before meeting his concerned eyes. “I’m bothered that I was bothered.”

Antonio half-smiled in amused confusion. “Only you.”

Lovino shut him up with a short kiss before saying, “I love having you inside me, love that even when you’re fucking me you’re still making love to me, that you never treat me like I’m just a replaceable hole to fuck then discard.” Antonio looked stricken by that statement, something that Lovino *really* had not meant to say, so he rushed on. “I don’t think I would have described myself as a bottom before, but I’m happily one with you. Now, I *really* need to go clean up.”

He snatched a towel from the drawer as he tore himself from Antonio’s loose hold and strode towards the door. “Lovi--!”

“Bathroom!” he insisted as an excuse and absconded.

Antonio found him later in the shower, of course. “I thought we were going to shower together.”

“I left the door unlocked for you.”

“Anyone could have walked in here,” he said, voice low but hands taking the conditioner bottle from Lovino to help him work it into his hair.

Lovino huffed. “Even with the water running?”

“I personally saw that as an invitation.”

“Well, it *was* one for you.”

Antonio hummed and reached for the soap to wash Lovino’s back, hands careful on him. They didn’t say anything for a couple minutes but when Lovino was massaging conditioner into Antonio’s hair, Antonio said, “Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

“No,” Lovino answered shortly.

“Okay.”

That caused Lovino to hesitate. “What?”

“Lovino, I don’t want you to feel like you *have* to tell me anything, but I want you to know that I will listen to anything you want to tell me and am pretty concerned by what you said earlier. That, and I will *never* treat you that way. I’ve never treated anyone like that and the thought of someone making *you* feel that way—“ Antonio cut himself off and took a deep breath. Lovino’s fingers had stilled their movements and he was exceedingly grateful that Antonio was facing away from him. “You, um. You can probably tell I don’t like it.”

“No shit,” he said, but he pressed a kiss to Antonio’s shoulder to soften the words. God, but this man...how? How did he even look at Lovino twice let alone decide that he wanted to date him? “Thank you.”

He murmured the words against his skin and wasn’t sure if Antonio heard them over the spray of the shower, but he thought he knew anyway. He immediately pulled back and started massaging his scalp again. “I-I don’t want to talk about it now, but...” he hesitated and Antonio tensed before him. Lovino licked his lips, nervous, and finished weakly, “High school wasn’t fun.”

Antonio whipped around to look at him so fast he almost slipped. Lovino caught him on instinct, expecting him to straighten, but Antonio shifted his weight off of him as his arms came around him in a tight hug. He didn’t say anything, only held him for a long moment before pressing a kiss to his forehead and letting him go.

Lovino was shaken but tried to steer them back to steadier ground. He made the motions to wash Antonio’s back and said, going for a light tone, “I need to text Mattie back. I told him I would get back to him with help for a problem when I woke up. Turns out he needs concealer for his neck and has no clue what he’s doing.”

“Gil?”

“Who else? Told you he was only interested in him...don’t even go there. Matthew was the one who helped me the most over the past three weeks, more supportive of me than anyone has *ever* been. He was trying to both make you jealous and get me to see that you *could* be jealous over me.”

The tension that had entered Antonio's shoulders melted away. "Explains why Alistair looked like they were having the time of their life. Probably a co-conspirator, with the added bonus of making Gil jealous for the hell of it."

Lovino shook his head and asked, "Why would they want to do that?"

"They weren't subtle about the fact that they thought Gilbert and I were being idiots with you and Mattie. That, and they grew up with a lot of brothers; teasing is how they show affection. ...Wait, back up a moment; you didn't think I would be jealous over someone dancing with you?" Antonio turned around to look at him like this was a ridiculous question.

Lovino blushed and tried to step around him to get under the water and rinse his hair. "What else was I supposed to think? I mean, yeah, you touched me in public a lot but you warned me you were physically affectionate."

Antonio let him go but stared at him as Lovino tipped his head backwards under the spray. After a long moment, he asked, "Lovino, do you think people came to the conclusion we were already together for no reason?" Lovino opened his eyes in surprise then immediately closed them with a hiss, product runoff hitting his eye. Antonio stepped forward and wiped at his face with gentle fingers, helped him rinse his hair. He continued, tone soft, "I knew I wasn't going to sleep with anyone else. I didn't want you to feel trapped, didn't want you to be scared off, so I said we weren't exclusive, but I tried really hard to make sure you didn't have time for anyone else. Yes, I'm affectionate, but I also wanted to discourage anyone else from approaching you. I didn't correct people when they assumed we were together, because I wanted it to be true."

God, but this entire thing had been *so stupid*. "You bastard," Lovino said with feeling and felt Antonio startle. Lovino looked up at him and hoped he saw the anguish in his face. "Do you know that hurt me the most? The fact that you treated me like I was yours, that everyone thought we were together, but that *you didn't want me*? That you didn't think I was worth having a relationship with? That I had to try so fucking hard to act like it didn't bother me when it felt like you were dangling a relationship I wanted so fucking badly in front of my face but know that I couldn't have it, that I couldn't ask for more?"

Antonio stared at him, his troubled expression saying clearly that no, he didn't know. Lovino closed his eyes and shook his head. He didn't want to get into this, wanted to just move on and act like the past three weeks had never happened because he had what he wanted now, who he wanted now. He knew that this had been a big misunderstanding, that it wasn't Antonio's fault and that he hadn't actually felt that way. So why were his eyes burning with tears?

"Lovi--"

"Forget it, I'm sorry. Just shut up and hold me, okay?"

Antonio did pull him into his arms but he also said, "No. I'm not going forget it. You are worth *everything*, Lovino. If I am not giving you what you need, I want you to ask for more and I will try to do the same with you. I wanted you. I *want* you and since I want this relationship, I'm going to speak up if something is bothering me. And seeing that look on

your face and knowing I put it there *bothers me*. I don't want you to feel like you have to hide any part of yourself from me, especially when you feel the need to tell me I really am being an idiot. You get all of me, but I get all of you, too, right?"

There was a lump of anxiety in Lovino's throat because he realized that having those words turned back on him outside of the bedroom was about 5 different kinds of scary, but he held him tight, took a deep breath, and trusted. "Yes."

After they were as dressed as they wanted (underwear—Lovino started leaving a clean pair or two as well as some socks at Antonio's place for convenience), Antonio pulled Lovino into cuddling on freshly changed sheets (laundry was a must at this point). He wanted him close after finally getting some clue of just how much he had hurt him and Lovino wasn't objecting. In fact, he seemed to be cautiously clinging to him. He didn't know why he thought last night would have fixed the last three weeks, but heavens above, he had been wrong. It was really only the first step to addressing Lovino's fears and issues that he had helped cause and Antonio accepted that. And it seemed like there were more than a few that he didn't fully understand.

High school wasn't fun. Fucking hell.

Yeah, he wanted to keep him close after *that* worrying statement.

After they got comfortable against each other checked his messages while Lovino did the same. Turned out that while he was doing his best to drive Lovino out of his mind, he had missed a *lot*. He ran a soothing hand over Lovino's back and checked in with his three best friends/partners in crime.

P: okay what did I miss?

F: ...P it's after 2

P: and?

F: proud of you

F: but seriously can Vargas move?

F: word is several of your housemates felt the need to vacate last night

P: um...

Antonio switched group chats to see what his housemates had said in theirs.

The last ones were telling enough.

Jo ão: YOU SAID THE COAST WAS CLEAR

Jo ão: I TRUSTED YOU

Martín: you're saying it's not?

Luciano: Okay Tonio, I am actually concerned for Lovino's health at this point

Martín: this was the first time we got campus police at our door when all the party goers had LEFT

Martín: as the only one stupid enough to stay here after the first HOUR I honestly don't blame someone thinking a murder was happening

Martín: I have never seen a cop turn red so fast

Antonio: ...sorry?

Antonio: and he's fine, I wouldn't hurt him

Several people began typing at once and Antonio thought it was a good time to go back to the people who weren't mad at him.

D: ...

W: called out

P: yeah my housemates seem pretty pissed

P: half expecting an angry mob of six soccer players at my door

P: but seriously what happened

"Jesus fucking *Christ*," Lovino said, staring at his phone and sitting up in alarm. "Yeah, he needs my help now. I've gotta go."

"What?" Antonio asked, unpleasantly surprised to watch Lovino get up and start pulling on his jeans from last night.

"Can I borrow a shirt?"

"Of course, but Lovi—"

"Blame your friend. I thought it was just a normal hickey but *no* you can actually see teeth marks! Even you haven't left marks like that on me, *fucking hell*. And he has a date in like 2 hours!"

F: we had to take care of a situation last night. W on enforcement, one of the assholes tried to hit M, didn't but W made an understandable threat

F: threat got blown out of proportion, everyone knows that M is with W by name. See above for the rest.

Antonio was curious but Lovino had thrown on one of Antonio's t-shirts and was striding towards the door. He jumped up and tried to catch him. God knew who was hanging around

the house. “Okay, but can I get a kiss goodbye?”

Lovino paused in jamming his feet into shoes. “A quick one,” he said before turning and pressing against him fully. The kiss was hard but very brief. Lovino went back to what he was doing and Antonio helped steady him when he lost his balance. “Thanks.”

Lovino put one hand on the door knob before he paused and looked at Antonio. “Hey, you want to go on a date?”

His mood was completely lifted by that question and the fact that he had asked him. “*Fuck yes.*”

Lovino smirked. “Text me, *tato*.” He opened the door and sprang out with a laugh, dodging Antonio’s attempt to grab him and pull him into a hug. He *loved* that laugh, loved that Lovino had a pet name for him that wasn’t some variation on “bastard,” that one word signaling that he had finally started seeing them as a couple. “Haven’t you had enough of me?”

“Never.” It was clear the word surprised him from the way he paused once again and just stared at him for a long second as Antonio made no move to take it back.

“Umm...” came an awkward voice and both he and Lovino startled at the intrusion. Leo was looking back and forth between them, extreme discomfort on his face.

“Hey, Leo, I’m heading out. See you!” Lovino said as he all but fled down the hall.

“Lovi—“

“I have a phone for fuck’s sake. You’d think I was leaving the fuckin’ country,” Lovino grumbled but Antonio still heard the smile in his voice in otherwise suspiciously quiet house.

Lovino disappeared from view and Antonio could barely make out his quick greetings to another person before the door shut downstairs.

Antonio looked at Leo, who was equal parts bemused and so very uncomfortable, and said, “Should I expect pitchforks and torches?”

“Not from me since I had the good sense to head to Liz’s place when João got your message. As for everyone else...probably only if they have to drag you out.”

“ANTONIO!” someone who sounded a lot like João yelled from what had to be the base of the stairs and Antonio winced.

“Five minutes unless you want to talk to me naked!”

“Three minutes then we drag you out.” Leo grimaced and Antonio quickly shut his door.

It took him 30 seconds to throw on a shirt and pair of jeans. He used the rest of the time to check back in with the friends that weren’t about to yell at him, scanning the messages since that morning.

P: ...what disturbing rumor?

P: what do you mean he's your cousin?!

P: I have to go deal with fallout from housemates but briefly

P: W I blame you for having to deal with this right now

P: Lovi ran out to help M cover up the fucking BITE MARK

Antonio walked from his room and watched the resulting messages appear on his home screen as he headed down the stairs.

F: *eyes*

D: *eyes*

W: exaggeration

W: but also not sorry

Antonio entered the now-put together living room and saw a not-pleased João, Luciano, Leo, and Martín waiting for him, Miguel and Felix absent but most likely there in spirit. *"Sorry for being so loud last night. I thought it would only affect João. I did warn you."*

Going by the near immediate shouting, Antonio decided that had been the wrong thing to say. But Lovino was now secure in the knowledge they were together and they had started to address what he had unintentionally put him through. *Worth it.*

Chapter End Notes

Look I know I said I would update the other stories but listen! The truth is I wrote a 35k word chapter for ALAWGD. It only happens to be like 6 or 7 chapters down the line. It's an emotional doozy, let me tell you! (But I won't.)

This chapter was going to include Matthew and Gilbert's first date, but it was getting quite long and I go into the field for a week tomorrow. It made sense to cut it off here. There's one part of the next chapter that more thematically fits with this title, but oh well.

So I've decided that this story will have a sequel for which I have many, many ideas and am unable to share any of them at the moment because, well, major spoilers for this story, too. I can't even tell you the title, but it has one. Oh, does it have one.

Title lyrics are from Garbage's "Temptation Waits" and upon review of the entire song, I just recommend the entire thing. But here's what I was going for months (years? years) ago when I first thought of the title. "Be careful what you're wishing. You come on like a drug. I just can't get enough....I've never needed anybody like this before."

Chapter 12: I Can't Even Say

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Matthew tried not to vibrate out of his skin in anticipation but was having a difficult time. He'd gotten to the library a good ten minutes early and was now scrolling aimlessly through his phone. He welcomed the moment of reprieve to collect himself after the mad dash that Lovino's urgency had encouraged.

Lovino, like the best friend that he was, had rushed him to the nearest drug store when Matthew texted him that his date was in 2 hours and he still had only the vaguest clue as to how to handle getting ready for it. He'd all but marched Matthew to the makeup aisle only to hold up different containers against his skin. To Matthew, the substances contained seemed to be the same color or close to it in every one, but Lovino was muttering and eyeing them critically, so he didn't say anything to that effect out loud. Lovino eventually picked one that he deemed good enough and a couple of other things that Matthew learned were important for making the concealer actually stay on his skin. Finally, to Matthew's horror, Lovino dragged him to the family planning section and told him to pick his favorite brands of lube and condoms *because you might need it eventually and it's better to have it than not*. When Matthew stuttered that he had no clue where to even begin, Lovino had blinked at him, shook his head, asked if he was allergic to latex, and picked for him.

The girl at the check-out counter looked pityingly at him as his expectant and shameless friend watched him pay with a truly epic blush on his face. The only reason he didn't keel over right there was that no one in the building looked (stared) at him and only saw War's boyfriend.

(That had happened during the day as Matthew left his room to get food and when he and Lovino walked together through campus. He didn't like being invisible, but he was coming to understand the difference between being seen as himself and being stared at as a curiosity. The pressure of those stares and his awareness of them was surprisingly tiring, so Matthew stuck to his room unless he had a real reason to leave it most of the day.)

For all that the trip was embarrassing, Matthew knew that it was necessary and remained grateful for Lovino as his friend painstakingly covered up the love bite on his neck, explaining each of his steps and why he was doing them. The end result was perfect.

Once they had made it back to their room, they debriefed the night before as Lovino worked, his account being much shorter than Matthew's as he made his rated PG-13 rather than NC-17. Lovino was shocked and angry on his behalf as he explained the ass kicking he and Gilbert had done the night before, how he found out everyone knew about them, and the rumored (false) threat of death to anyone who hurt him.

That took a while to explain and Lovino was digging through Matthew's closet to try to help him find something to wear by the end of it. He'd asked Gilbert, who had asked to plan Matthew's first date ever, what the dress code was for whatever he was thinking, he'd gotten

casual, Mattie, what you normally wear is fine though you might want a heavier jacket in response. Lovino then proceeded to give advice as to what to wear, decrying how loose Matthew usually wore his clothes. You actually have an ass, Mattie. Do you know how many other white boys can't say the same?

Now Matthew sat in a small common space in the library decked out in a pair of black jeans that Matthew usually avoided because of how they clung to his thighs, a plum colored t-shirt that Lovino had insisted on, and a black leather jacket in concession of their mode of transportation. He was trying not to dwell on the fact he would be riding on the back of Gilbert's motorcycle, the news of it stunning him for a moment this morning because *really? Of course*, Gilbert casually had a motorcycle. It was silly of Matthew to assume otherwise.

He was honestly starting to think the universe was conspiring against him having any sense of propriety when it came to Gilbert; the boy kept meeting attraction standards that Matthew didn't even know he had.

The roaring of a distinct kind of engine approached the library and Matthew shot to his feet so fast that black spots danced over his vision. He took a steadying breath, squeezing his eyes hard in an attempt to clear them. Matthew then blinked several times, making his contacts come back into focus before heading out the library.

It felt a little ridiculous, but he couldn't help the wide smile that came to his lips as a helmeted figure approached on a black motorcycle. Matthew walked down the sidewalk a ways until he reached the nearby parking area. Gilbert stopped in front of him and turned off the bike. To Matthew's surprise, he noticed that he was wearing a backpack that looked kind of full as he dismounted. That wasn't all he was wearing, of course, but the dark blue jeans and black shirt under a leather jacket wasn't far from his usual attire.

Gilbert removed the matte black helmet and Matthew had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at how his hair was flattened against his head. "Hey, Gil."

Gilbert ruffled a hand through his hair like it was routine and Matthew wasn't laughing when he smiled back at him. "Hey, Mattie," he returned, stepping closer to him and Matthew realized that this was the first time he had seen his eyes uncovered in sunlight. They took on a lighter, pink tint that transfixed him. "Want to make good on that mutual desire from earlier?"

What? ... Oh! Matthew moved forward to meet him in a kiss and felt some of the day's tension ease out of him. The relief from that one touch made him want more, but they were outside and Gilbert had this way of making him forget himself, so he broke it quickly. He didn't bodily move away, however, and he asked from a close distance, "What's the plan?"

Gilbert gave him a look that very much conveyed that he wanted a longer kiss but he said, "It's a kind of choose your own adventure. I wanted to plan it but realized that it would probably be more fun if we figured it out together. First..." Gilbert stepped back and set his helmet on his bike before taking off the backpack. He pulled out another black helmet. "Let's get this on you."

He handed the equipment to Matthew and he tucked what hair he could behind his ears before pulling it on. There was a catch of some sort and Matthew's fingers fumbled with it. He hadn't really looked at the thing when he'd pulled it on, so the lack of buckle—like a bicycle helmet—caught him by surprise. Gilbert huffed a laugh and stepped forward to help him. Practiced hands deftly secured it, Matthew's pulse picking up a little at the accidental touches along his throat then the deliberate caress as he lightly trailed his fingertips down his neck to linger where the love bite was hidden. The visor lacked the dark tint of Gilbert's so Matthew watched Gilbert watch him for a handful of slow seconds, Matthew's heart rate increasing and lips parting in anticipation. Unthinkingly, he tilted his head to the side, exposing more of the skin there. Gilbert's narrowed in focus before he blinked and looked around and *oh right they were outside!*

Matthew blushed and Gilbert dropped his hand to his shoulder, shaking his head with a smirk on his face. "I don't know how I'm going to survive you," he said quietly before dropping his hand from him.

"Okay, riding is relatively simple," he continued without explaining that cryptic statement, zipping his bag closed. "Would you mind wearing this while I drive?"

"Sure." He took the bag easily and Gilbert stepped back to the motorcycle to put on his helmet.

"Hold on to me and lean with me. I won't be able to hear you very well unless we shout, so if you need to tell me something that can't wait, tap my shoulder and I'll pull over. When you get off, leave from the right side, alright?"

Gilbert sat on his bike and motioned him over once it was turned on. Matthew took a deep breath, checked that the backpack was secure on him, and swung a leg over, steadying himself by holding Gilbert's shoulder.

Actually sitting on the bike was...closer than Matthew was prepared for, his thighs bracketing Gilbert's. Sitting upright, the only logical place for Matthew to hold on was at Gilbert's hips or his shoulders and neither felt very secure. He leaned forward and hugged Gilbert lightly. "Is this okay?" he shouted.

Gilbert nodded and patted Matthew's arms. Then they were moving.

Riding itself wasn't complicated, Matthew leaning with Gilbert easily, the concept not unlike turning on his skates. Gilbert kept to city streets as they headed away from campus, avoiding potholes and moving with traffic. Matthew hadn't had the chance to leave the bubble of campus a lot, so he tried to stay attentive to their route in an attempt to introduce himself to the city he would be in for four years. All that was fine, welcome even.

No, the problem was all him.

Matthew was hyperaware of where he was touching Gilbert in a way that was damned distracting. Yes, they had been pressed against each other more than once, but resting his hands on Gilbert's torso or at his hips when they were at a stop light was completely different. His brain was starting to create a mental map of Gilbert's body and Matthew spent

more than a little energy trying to get himself to *stop*. It was worse when, as a light turned green, Matthew accidentally slid his hands under Gilbert's open jacket to hold on to *him* and *oh, good Lord!*

He blushed but didn't want to let go with the bike moving, not quite comfortable riding yet, so he waited impatiently for another red light to move his hands safely back to Gilbert's hips. Gilbert turned his head in a pantomime of looking back at him and brought one cold hand down to press lightly against Matthew's, intertwine their fingers, and move their hands forward to rest on his stomach. He let him go and shrugged one shoulder before focusing back on the road. *It's alright if you want to hold me like this*, Matthew interpreted, *but you don't have to*.

In response, he was careful to place his hands on top of the leather. He bent his head so that the helmet touched Gilbert's shoulder and shook his head, overwhelmed and embarrassed.

Gilbert patted one of his hands lightly then got them moving again.

Altogether, the trip took about 20 minutes. Gilbert pulled into a public parking lot in front of a park and turned off the bike. Matthew dismounted and went about the task of making himself somewhat presentable once the helmet was off. Gilbert did the same as he turned to him. "You alright?"

"Yeah," he replied light blush on his face but he did his best to smile sheepishly at him. "It was fun. I liked riding with you."

"Good," he pulled him into a one armed hug and kissed his forehead. He pulled sunglasses from his jacket, took the backpack from him and one of his hands. "Have you been over here yet?"

They started walking and Matthew shook his head. "No, I don't really know much about the city and haven't left campus a lot. Where are we?"

"This is Victory Street and we're right on the edge of the most queer-friendly neighborhood in the city. There's just about everything here: a dollar theater, pizza, ice cream, the park... hell, they even have an old-fashioned arcade. It's still early so we have some time before the night crowd comes through. There are a few bars and clubs around, but just as many coffee shops."

"Wow," Matthew said as they crossed the street and turned the corner. There were a lot of flags flying that had nothing to do with nationality. He recognized the rainbow flag and the one for pan pride since Alfred rather pointedly had a matching sticker on his laptop, but the rest were a mystery. "You weren't kidding."

"Nope. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat. What do you have in mind?"

"If you want we could go see a movie, though I don't know what's playing. We could pick something with a later show time then grab an early dinner? The theater is a few minutes'

walk and we'll pass by plenty of places on the way."

Matthew grinned at him. "Sounds like a plan to me." Gilbert didn't do anything for a second beyond looking at him. "Gil?"

He seemed to shake himself before he started walking and the slightest bit of color rose to his cheeks. *So pretty—Gah!* "Sorry, Mattie. Caught me off guard with that smile of yours."

Matthew lightly elbowed him. "Yeah, right. How—"

"I'm serious. You're really cute when you smile like that."

"...oh." Matthew stared at him with wide eyes, ended up tripping over his feet from his distraction.

Gilbert brought his hands up to catch him almost faster than Matthew could see, though he did stop himself before inadvertently drove the helmet in his hand into Matthew's stomach. "Careful there."

"Thanks, sorry," he said, blushing as he righted himself. "I'm, um, not the most coordinated off the ice and outside of a fight."

"Don't worry about it," Gilbert squeezed his hand lightly and they kept walking. "What were you saying?"

Matthew cleared his throat and shrugged. "Just asking how your day went."

"About as well as expected. Club meeting, work. There was a kids' session and I can say with relief that no one injured themselves today. Ludwig took the news about us really well, so that was a definite plus. What about you? Outside of what happened at practice this morning, which I am curious about."

Matthew winced. "Well, I can certainly say it's markedly improved. I'd rather wait until we're sitting to really get into it, though."

"...That's not concerning at all." Matthew caught Gilbert's incredulous look and bumped into him lightly in quiet reassurance.

"What about you? I wasn't the one who came out the worst from the rumors."

"Not much to say. Alistair and Francis have started doing damage control on the death threat thing. Scottie in particular was pretty livid about it. They get protective if pushed."

Matthew hummed. "Explains the messages they sent me." Alistair had sent him just a few texts around noon asking how he was doing and if anyone had bothered him because of the night before. "Today wasn't really all that bad. It had its funny moments at least. But what's good to eat around here? Do you feel like eating anything?"

"Well, there's this—nope, never mind." At Matthew's look, Gilbert shrugged. "Okay, there's a ramen place that's actually pretty good, but that's not exactly first date food."

Matthew considered what trying to eat ramen in his room was like and whole heartedly agreed, though he was curious as to what good ramen tasted like. “Fair. What about the diner down there?” Matthew nodded toward what looked like a 50s style restaurant that was called *Dickenson’s Diner*.

“Oh, yeah, Emily’s. Sure, they have a good number of choices, really good burgers and pies.”

“Emily’s?”

“Yeah, like Emily Dickenson but also after one of the owners. It’s run by two married women that are also history nerds who love mocking how academics refuse to acknowledge that queer people have always been around. Like every menu item’s name and description refers to a famous historical figure or queer trope and how historians have ignored clear evidence that they were in no way cishetero.”

“That’s super cool!” Matthew said, bouncing a little because *fuck yeah*, history.

Gilbert looked at him, faintly amused before he said, “Forgot you were also a history nerd, otherwise I would have suggested it first thing. The owners, Emily and Michelle, are actually really friendly and tend to stop to chat to people who look like they are particularly enjoying the theme. We’ve gotta pick a movie first though.”

They had arrived at the movie theater and Gilbert lightly pulled him into the lobby. It wasn’t one of chain movie theaters and the rather...eclectic mix of movies was a testament to that.

“I...don’t even know where to start,” Matthew admitted, looking at a board of six movies that he had never seen and was at best vaguely familiar with their existence. None of them came with descriptions, but he did suppose smart phones were a thing.

“...I think one of these is actually German.” Gilbert said, confused and surprised frown on his face.

“Do you want to watch it? I’m sure it would have subtitles.” Matthew said, eyeing the only one without an English title. He was pretty open when it came to watching new movies, so this film was about as good as another to him.

“I don’t know. German movies can be...let’s look up plot descriptions first.” Gilbert pulled out his phone and Matthew looked over his shoulder. The results were all in German, but before Matthew could pull away, Gilbert cursed and typed in what had to be the English translation of the title in the search bar. *The Lives of Others* was the movie. “Sorry.”

“No worries. Thank you,” Matthew said, leaning into his side since his hands were full. “Can I take the helmet or something? You’re carrying all the things when I have two perfectly empty hands.”

“Thanks,” Gilbert handed him the helmet absently as he stared at the phone. “Um, I think we should pick a different one unless you are really into East German surveillance films. It looks a bit heavier than I what I was hoping for the tone of today.”

“Alright,” Matthew agreed easily. “What exactly are you going for?”

“Well, not depressing as a start. How do you feel about action movies? I heard *John Wick* was pretty good and it has a showtime an hour and a half from now, plenty of time to get food.”

“Sounds good.”

There wasn’t anyone in line, so they walked up to the counter and Gilbert rather speedily got their tickets. It wasn’t five minutes later when they were walking out of the theater and Matthew said, slight tease in his voice, “‘Not depressing’ isn’t exactly descriptive, Gil.”

“I guess it’s not,” Gilbert said, looking at him with a slight smirk. “But I honestly don’t have a single ‘tone’ I was going for, mostly just a list of goals.”

Matthew raised his eye brows. “Such as...”

“I want you to have fun and I want to have fun with you. I want us to get to know each other more. And...” Gilbert gave him a sly look, obvious even with his sunglasses on, “...I want to kiss you again, preferably for longer than five seconds.”

Matthew was suddenly very aware of the makeup on his neck. It was a struggle not to stare at his boyfriend and his face heated but he licked lips and asked hesitantly, “Just five seconds?”

Gilbert laughed and smiled wide enough to show teeth. “No, not just five seconds, but I think I’ll keep those thoughts to myself for the moment. I want to talk to you without us being distracted by me putting those out there.”

Like that’s not distracting all on its own, Matthew thought privately but smiled anyway. As much as he wanted to kiss him again, he was ecstatic that Gilbert was invested in trying to get this right. It was more confirmation that he was so much more than War and it gave him a bubbly feeling of contentment. “Then let’s go eat.”

Matthew was just as entranced by Emily’s as Gilbert hoped he would be. The diner kept most of the original design of the space, with some modern updates. The décor was relatively understated and the framed pictures would have been unremarkable but for the unique frames on each one and the sheer number of them on the walls. Each frame held a depiction of famous people whose queer identities had been erased by historians and each frame was designed according to the style of their times. Michelle actually ran the place, but each frame had been made by Emily who primarily worked as an artist.

As it was still pretty early, he and Matthew didn’t have a problem getting a table along the wall, a small two-person booth. Gilbert watched Matthew’s eyes dart around the room, silently pleased as he recognized people.

After about a minute of Matthew taking in their surroundings, he blinked and looked at Gilbert. “Shit, I’m sorry, Gil. I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“Nothing to apologize for, Mattie. I’m happy you like the place. I take it you know a good portion of the people on the wall.”

Matthew nodded, face lighting up as he looked around again. “I know a lot of them, but I never knew they were queer.” He turned to beam at him. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Anytime. Take a look at the menu.” Matthew’s inquisitive eyes fell on the laminated paper and they widened as he began to read.

“‘Closest Confidant Chowder’? ‘Gal Pal Sal-ad’? Oh, God, the wings!” Gilbert knew that the wing flavors were each named after an individual depending on their “sauciness,” e.g. their ability to fuck shit up. Matthew laughed, clearly delighted, and the sound and sight of him was a shock to Gilbert’s system. God, he was in *so much trouble* because Matthew’s dark blue eyes sparkled with surprised joy and he was incredibly cute and Gilbert wanted nothing more than to pull him into his arms. He had never heard that sound from Matthew and he wanted to hear it again.

His laugh started loud enough to draw some looks. Immediately, he winced apologetically and ducked his head, embarrassed by his own reaction. Matthew didn’t have to apologize for shit, let alone being happy for two seconds, and it was mildly alarming that he thought he did.

Gilbert knew that Matthew hadn’t been with anyone physically before him. He could guess that he had never been emotionally involved with anyone either based on his utter bafflement that Gilbert was attracted to him. Surely *someone* had to have approached him at some point, right? Or at least told him that he should never apologize for existing?

Just how much was Matthew going to be surprised by him being a decent human being, let alone the good romantic partner as he intended to become?

Mildly concerning was an understatement.

Gilbert tried to give him a reassuring smile that had to have worked a little as Matthew’s shoulders relaxed minutely. He wanted to touch him, but didn’t want to overwhelm him. At a loss, Gilbert turned to his own menu but kept his hands on the table if Matthew wanted to reach out and take one.

They chatted about food choices and preferences until they gave their orders to their server. As they walked away, Gilbert looked at Matthew and asked, “Could we talk about what happened today?”

Matthew sighed and fidgeted with his water glass. “Yeah. It wasn’t great.”

“What happened, exactly? Did someone say something to you after practice?” Gilbert wanted to know more about what had happened that morning, but Alistair was right. If Matthew wanted to tell him, he would.

“No one *said* anything, but they didn’t really have to. They only stared at me and, well, my neck when I walked around campus today. I’m used to blending in, fading into the background, so it was pretty disconcerting.”

Matthew was looking at his water like it was extremely interesting and Gilbert could tell it was still bothering him. He *hated* how something as simple as who he was was affecting Matthew like this. Tentatively, he reached out and touched his hand. “Mattie, I’m sorry.”

He blew out another long breath and finally met his eyes, troubled. “It’s not your fault, Gil.”

“I know. Doesn’t mean I don’t wish you didn’t have to deal with that.” Matthew turned his hand up to take his, fingers cold but welcome against his skin.

“That’s only part of it. Yes, I wish I wasn’t a walking spectacle, but I hate how they think about how we’re together. They don’t look at me and see *me* or even your boyfriend. They see me as War’s boyfriend, the one that managed to catch you long enough for you to claim me in a way that frankly makes me pretty damn uncomfortable. It’s one thing for us to say that I am yours, but it means something else when they say it, you know?”

“Yes, I think I do,” Gilbert said gently, feeling ill at the thought but not wanting to interrupt him.

“And how they think about you! Like you’re nothing more than a title they gave you!” For the first time in this fucked up conversation, rage flashed across his face, but it was gone so quickly Gilbert wasn’t sure he’d actually seen it. He started moving his thumb against Matthew’s hand in what he hoped was a soothing gesture. “It’s not right. And I know people are always going to be idiots who believe whatever is easiest for them, but they’re just *so* wrong about you.” He clinched his jaw and looked away again.

“...What can I do? What can we do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk about it? I want to help you feel better.”

“Not really. I don’t want to think about it more than I already have, but if you have any ideas, I’m all ears.”

“Alistair did their best to forcibly remove the information from the Internet.”

Matthew gave a startled, incredulous laugh. “They did what?”

“I told you they get protective. They took issue with basically everything that happened when I told them this morning and, once they decide they want something, not much can stop them. And, just so you understand, it was for both of us. Alistair apparently has decided that you’re part of their people, so don’t be offended if they start teasing you; it’s their thing.” It was one thing for his best friend to approve of his boyfriend, but a whole new and reassuring level of great for Alistair to adopt him into their small family of choice, too.

Matthew was smiling at him, obviously pleased. “That worked. Consider me cheered up.”

“Would it help things if I walked around campus obviously marked by you? It may at the very least get them to stop thinking this is in any way one-sided.”

Matthew froze, eyes going unfocused at the thought. "...I mean I wouldn't object but I rather it be because you want to than to prove a point to other people."

"No problem there." Matthew stared at him and Gilbert stared back.

Time for a change in subject. "Are you excited for your game this week?"

Matthew blinked slowly once but then pivoted. "Yeah. It will be nice to test our skills against new people and I think we'll be ready by Friday. Will you still be able to make it?"

"Yep. I don't know who's coming with me, but I'll definitely be there."

"Okay, thanks. I really don't know how much time I'll end up playing, but I appreciate you coming anyway."

"Of course. I don't know a lot about hockey, but I want to know about something that you devote that much time to."

Matthew smiled. "Thanks. The scholarship is why I'm on the team now, but I love playing."

"How did you start?"

The conversation between them clicked easily into place as it had the day they had gotten coffee together, natural with a few pauses as they ate or a topic died out without an obvious segway into something else.

They ended up disagreeing about the value of a number of elements in the Star Wars prequels and that led to a lively debate that kept them going through the end of dinner and into the movie theater. "Just because Anakin's actions were inexcusable doesn't make them any less understandable. For all that the movies were poorly executed, they *did* explain how he became Vader."

"A kid grew up with the potential to do so much good but made the choice as an adult to point a metaphorical gun at a galaxy and call it order."

"Okay, but how did the kid grow up? Yes, he had the potential to be good but was he really given the opportunity?"

"Yes, Mattie. There was always another option and he made choices that killed a lot of people, over and over again."

"Gil, we're talking about a boy who was forced by circumstance to leave his mother behind in a life of slavery. The Jedi told a boy who was never allowed to own himself, let alone anything else, that he had to let go of all attachment because that would lead to some mysterious evil. He was given to a young, grieving, and canonically rash Obi-Wan to train, all while being told he had this great power and was the chosen one. At every opportunity that the Jedi Order could have supported him mentally and emotionally, especially in Episode III, it failed to do so. Yes, he made really fucked up choices, but they didn't come out of nowhere." Gilbert stared at him because while after a certain point committing of atrocities

he truly stopped giving a fuck about the whys of it, Matthew hadn't said a thing that was inaccurate. "What?"

"You literally have sympathy for the devil, one of the greatest villains in cinema history."

Matthew shrugged. "I don't believe that people are born evil, but made evil through a lack of the right people giving a damn at the right time or just shitty circumstances. Why should Vader be any different? It's not sympathy so much as an acknowledgement that the deck had been stacked against him and that things could have been different if the right people had reached out at so many points. That's why Luke was able to turn him in Episode VI; his son showed him that mercy and forgiveness was still possible and worth fighting for. Yeah, too little, too late, but that's how I understand the character."

Gilbert stared at him a second longer before giving up and just pulling him into a hug. They were standing outside their theater, about to walk in and find their seats, and Gilbert just had to hold him for a second. *Too good for this world. Too pure.* "Never change, *Liebling*."

"...Thank you?" He said, sounding confused but he returned the hug as much as he was able with Gilbert wearing the backpack and Matthew holding the helmet. He pulled back a little and smiled wryly. "So you admit that the prequels weren't awful."

Gilbert made a disgusted sound at the back of his throat but kissed him briefly before taking his hand and leading him forward. "I will admit they serve a purpose. They had the *potential* to not be awful."

Matthew shook his head. "I'll eventually convince you."

"I seriously doubt it. Now, where do you want to sit?" The theater, as Gilbert expected, wasn't crowded. For one, it was still early on a Saturday. For another, this movie came out several years ago at this point. People could watch it from the comfort of their couch if they wanted to. There were only three other parties there; two couples and a group of what looked like high schoolers.

"I usually go for high-ish in the theater and middle of the row, but as long as I don't have to crane my neck I'm okay."

"Alright." Gilbert's eyes scanned the room again and he started leading them to a spot that fit Matthew's preferences while being as far away from other people as possible. "I don't think I mentioned it before, but there won't be previews."

"Damn. I like previews, even if I never actually go see any of the movies." They sat down and spent an awkward moment trying to figure out how they were going to keep holding hands with an armrest between them. They laughed at themselves and ended up resting their clasped hands on Matthew's thigh as the lights went down and the movie started.

Gilbert expected the sudden onslaught of sound, but Matthew flinched, his whole body tensing. "Shit," he said quietly.

"You okay?"

“Yeah. My ears are a little sensitive but I’ll get used to it,” he said reassuringly but Gilbert made a note of it; all other dates involving movies should happen at his place unless they couldn’t avoid going to a theater.

Matthew did seem to get used to it as the movie kept going. It only took about 20 minutes for Gilbert to realize this wasn’t going to be the mindless action movie he had been aiming for. “What the fuck?” he said quietly, staring at the screen in shock.

“...I don’t think I’ve ever rooted for a character to go apeshit as much as I am right now,” Matthew said in response.

So much for being able to distract Matthew into making out with him.

It was dark as they left the theater and the streets were busy with what was the dinner rush of people at restaurants. The noise of the street had increased, too, but that didn’t stop them from talking about the movie. No, what got them to stop was the fact they had walked about three blocks and had no exact destination in mind. “Wait, Gil? Where are we going?”

Gilbert shook himself and realize they never had talked about that. He had unconsciously led them in the general direction of his bike, but they really should talk about it. “Oh. I wasn’t going anywhere in particular, honestly just started walking. What do you want to do? It’s still pretty early.”

“...I don’t know. I don’t feel like doing anything specific.” Matthew shrugged. “What about you?”

...Not a great question since I want to do you, even though I also don’t. Gilbert hadn’t forgotten in the least their shared desire to make out from earlier, but didn’t want to push anything in case Matthew felt pressured. “Nothing comes to mind. I *do* know I don’t want this date to be over yet. We’re in the middle of a very important discussion, after all,” he joked since they had mostly been discussing the fight choreography. “We could go for a walk? Either in the park or around the neighborhood?”

“I want to keep spending time with you but I don’t want to walk much of anywhere right this second, not after the week of practice I just had,” Matthew said with a wince.

“We could find somewhere here to hang out...or head back towards campus.”

There was a beat of weighted quiet before Matthew nervously licked his lips and said, “Campus, then. No need to spend money if we don’t actually want anything.”

“Okay,” Gilbert said and pulled lightly on Matthew’s hand to get them walking towards his bike again. Very carefully, he asked, “Do you want to hang out in one of the common areas?”

“No, especially since we would probably be gawked at. I know I said I’m okay with us being public and I am but this...” Matthew trailed off, searching for the words and Gilbert gave him the time he needed with a light squeeze to his hand. “...this is ours, not theirs, if that makes sense?”

“I think I get it,” Gilbert said and he meant it. He didn’t want their bubble of intimacy that had slowly strengthened throughout the evening to be intruded upon. That, and he didn’t like that people started treating their relationship as a spectacle after last night. “So that leaves your dorm room or my place.”

“...Lovi had a rough night and will probably be sleeping by the time we get back to campus. I-is it okay if we go to yours? Would Ludwig be bothered by me coming over?”

“Of course and I don’t think so, but I will warn him.”

“Could you double check? Knowing we’re together might be different than seeing me with you and I really don’t want him to feel weird about this. I already had to convince him once that I wasn’t just friends with him to get to you and would rather not have to do it again.”

Yikes. Gilbert winced, torn between being pleased that Matthew was a good friend to his brother and uncomfortable that he had been his little brother’s friend first. It wasn’t like it was new information, but it was easy to forget. “Yeah, okay. Let me call him since it’s probably faster.”

Gilbert took out his phone and Matthew leaned against him and went on tip toe to kiss his cheek. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

...Ludwig had better be okay with Matthew coming over. As it was, Gilbert was about five minutes away from trying to convince Matthew that being in the shadows was privacy enough and pushing him up against one of the trees in the park. “Of course, *Liebling*.”

He rang Ludwig and his brother answered fairly quickly. “Gilbert? What’s wrong?”

He opened his mouth to respond in German automatically, but then realized he didn’t want Matthew to feel deliberately excluded. “Mattie’s coming over and he wanted to make sure you wouldn’t be bothered.”

“...Of course he did. I do not mind if he comes over, but I am going to head out for a while. I would rather not be around to see or hear *anything*.”

“Fair enough,” he said before looking at Matthew. “He doesn’t mind.”

“Okay, that’s good,” he said, relieved smile on his face. They had made it to his bike and he was eager to get moving.

“Thanks, West.”

“No, thank *you* for the warning. I will be out of here within the next fifteen minutes. Goodbye, Gilbert,”

“Bye.” Gilbert hung up and put his phone away, taking off the backpack as he did so. Matthew took it as he gave him his helmet. “He’s going out, so it will be just us at the house. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, though I hope he wasn’t going because of me. I don’t want to kick him out of his own space.” Matthew said, frowning.

“You didn’t, I promise.” Ludwig had probably left more because of Gilbert more than anything else. His partners tended to get...loud with him. Gilbert helped Matthew get his helmet on and caught Matthew staring at him. “What is it?”

He blinked and blushed, looking down quickly. “Sorry.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just I...I’m still surprised, I guess. That you’re my boyfriend, I mean.”

...How is it that I want to cuddle him and absolutely rail him because he’s adorable? “Of course you wait until your helmet is on to say something like that.” Gilbert squeezed his shoulder and put on his helmet as Matthew took the bag. “Trust me, I’m the lucky one. Let’s get out of here.”

They made decent time back to his house, which was just a couple of minutes’ drive past campus. Gilbert had rather necessarily not allowed himself to be distracted by Matthew’s hands on him, even when he almost tentatively slid his hands under his jacket to hold on to him. He didn’t know what had changed to make him more comfortable with the touch now than he had been earlier in the day, but Gilbert wasn’t complaining.

Gilbert’s house was actually his and Ludwig’s, the title in their name and mortgage already paid off. When they came to the States after their parents’ deaths, they lived with their great-uncle Fritz. Gilbert doubted that they were actually related by blood, but that hadn’t really mattered to the old man. He treated them like they were his sons and, when he died last year, his will reflected that. As Ludwig was still 17 at the time, his death had them in a tough position in terms of immigration and child custody concerns, but he did his best to make sure they wouldn’t have to worry about where they were going to live or how they were going to eat for the next few years at least, for which Gilbert was *incredibly* grateful. Of anything, the financial stability was the biggest factor that kept Ludwig with him (despite the fact that *he was already 17 for fuck’s sake* but whatever).

In any case, the house was a two-story Queen Anne that had been built before cookie-cutter houses were the norm. It had been renovated at some point to add an attached garage and get rid of the original lead pipes, but that was about it. Gilbert didn’t bother pulling into the garage since he would have to take Matthew home eventually. Gilbert turned off the bike and Matthew dismounted, looking around as he waited for Gilbert to unlock the front door. “You live here?”

“Yeah, grew up here for the most part, too. Come on in.” The front door was to one side of the house and there was a small foyer where Ludwig and Gilbert kept their most frequently worn shoes and coats, complete with a small bench. “We got really lucky with our uncle, Fritz. He lived here for something like 25 years before he took in me and West, so it felt like home really quickly.”

Matthew was quiet for a long moment before he ventured gently, “Lived?”

“Yeah. He died about a year and some change ago.” June 3rd. It had been on June 3rd but he didn’t want to think about it. “He left most of what he had to me and West and the rest went to a couple of charities.”

“Oh, I didn’t...I’m sorry. I didn’t realize...” Matthew reached out and touched his arm, nothing but compassion on his face. It wasn’t pity; Gilbert had seen that emotion on enough people to recognize it instantly.

“Thanks and don’t worry about it, *Liebling*. Do you want something to drink?” Gilbert asked, taking his hand and pulling him into the rest of the house.

“Some water would be great,” Matthew said, easily following him through the living room and into the kitchen, letting the topic go. “I believe we had been discussing the movie?”

Gilbert’s mouth curved as he poured a glass from each of them. “Right. Where were we again?”

“...I don’t remember either.” They shared a laugh that broke the lingering sadness and brought to the front of Gilbert’s mind a different kind of tension altogether. They were alone, truly alone for the first time since Gilbert had happened upon him two, three weeks ago. “But I did like it and honestly I’ve never been more on the side of the antihero.”

“Yeah...West shouldn’t watch that movie. I mean he would feel vindicated by the end but that first 20 minutes...”

“He likes dogs? Thanks,” he added, taking the water from him.

“He *loves* dogs. Yeah, dogs are great but they’re the only thing that makes him become a pile of goo. He would either cry or start yelling if he watched it without knowing what was coming.”

“Still, good choice with movies. Dark without being depressing and I had fun.”

“That’s one goal accomplished then.” Gilbert said with a smirk.

Matthew went still for a moment before he gave him a small, secretive smile. He put the glass down. “And we got to know each other better.”

“That’s another.” Gilbert stepped forward, very much in Matthew’s space with arms to either side of him, bracketing him against the counter.

Matthew’s lips parted and his eyes dropped down to Gilbert’s mouth. “I-I think you missed one.”

“Let me fix that?” Gilbert didn’t move, waited for Matthew to answer him.

Matthew was breathing deeply and obviously distracted, because it took him a wonderfully fraught moment to realize that Gilbert actually wanted him to say something. He met Gilbert’s eyes again from a short distance, put his hands on his waist, and said, “Yes.”

Gilbert closed the distance between them, mouth claiming his, arms wrapping around him, and body pressing carefully against him. The sound of utter *relief* that Matthew made wrecked something in him because *oh fuck, yes*. Matthew pressed up into the kiss and back against him, falling into the simple kiss. Gilbert ran his fingers through Matthew's hair and held him close.

For all that neither of them initiated a French kiss, the sound of their mouths coming to together over and over again was loud in the otherwise quiet house. Matthew eventually broke the kiss to ask breathlessly, "Can we sit?"

"Yeah," he kissed him one last time before pulling away and taking his hand. "Couch or my room?"

The question stopped Matthew literally in his tracks and Gilbert stopped moving at the slightest resistance. He was suddenly nervous and Gilbert had to think about what he just said. "Nothing you don't want, ever, okay? It's your choice, Mattie. And, as sexy as you are, I really just want to kiss you tonight. Sure, I want to kiss you *a lot*, but that was my ultimate goal here. We can go as slow as you want."

Matthew seemed to relax at that and squeezed his hand. "What time is Ludwig coming back?"

"He didn't say and I'm not sure where he went, but maybe not for a while?"

"...Your room, then."

"Okay," Gilbert said, internally cheering because *of course* he wanted to see Matthew in his bed for the sight alone. That, and the couch restricted movement more than he preferred. He started leading them towards the stairs when a thought occurred and he stopped, looking at Matthew's neck.

"Gil?"

"I...can I make a request?"

"...okay?"

"Would you mind taking the makeup off your neck? I want to see the mark I left."

Matthew inhaled sharply and his eyes went a little unfocused. *Interesting*. "Yeah, sure. Let me get—Lovi made sure I had makeup wipes. Hold on."

Gilbert waited as Matthew went to rummage around in his jacket, processing what just happened.

He had been extremely nervous about heading to his room until Gilbert had reminded him that they were going slow, but he hadn't *said* anything. He was going to need to be exceptionally careful to make sure Matthew was always comfortable with things, which was fine; he had more experience and not being an asshole cost him nothing.

Matthew thought they were going to be making out long enough that Ludwig might come back. No objections there.

Matthew didn't blink at his somewhat telling request. In fact, he had jumped at it, seemed affected by it. Another check in the column that Matthew was a little kinky, even if he didn't know it yet. *Goddamn*, but Gilbert was lucky.

Matthew was rather hurriedly rubbing at his neck with a white cloth as he walked back to Gilbert. "You shouldn't have to scrub, *Liebling*. May I?"

He pursed his lips and looked at the cloth in his hand like it had personally offended him. "Yes, please. I'm sure I missed some of it."

Gilbert stepped forward and took it from him. Matthew lifted his chin to let him see, but the love bite he had left was mostly visible already, stark against his skin and the light cover-up that lingered. Gilbert cradled Matthew's head with one hand while the other gently but firmly cleaned him off. At the first touch of Gilbert's hand, he saw more than heard his breath catch. The somewhat harassed expression melted to one of surprise and then cautious hunger. It was the last that prompted Gilbert to say something.

"You know, I realize that I asked you if you were upset about this, but not if you liked it. Do you?"

He licked his lips nervously. "The mark?"

"Yes, and the fact that I'm the one who marked you." Thinking he got all of the makeup off, he touched one finger to the mark and pressed down, just a little. Matthew shuddered and Gilbert was enjoying this far too much.

"And if I do?" Matthew asked quietly, lifting his head and meeting his eyes in a small and completely unnecessary challenge, blush on his face.

"Then you'll probably be happy to know that I like it, too. Why do you think I asked you to show it to me?"

"Oh," he said softly in realization and Gilbert could no longer resist the urge to kiss him lightly.

"Remember what I said last night?" he asked, holding him close. "I don't want you to ever be ashamed about how I make you feel. I want to know what you like so that I can keep doing it."

"Okay," Matthew pressed a soft kiss to his lips and then pushed him away lightly, towards the stairs. "I think I would like to keep going to your room now."

Gilbert smirked at him but didn't say anything more as they moved up the stairs. He was surprised when Matthew said, "Wait a second." He did, pausing to turn and look back at him, only realizing with some horror that Matthew was looking at the pictures that lined the wall heading up the staircase.

“Mattie—“

“Is this you?” He asked, grin splitting his face now. The picture was one of him and Ludwig about a six months after they had come to stay with Fritz. Ludwig was laughing uproariously and a young Gilbert was staring at the camera, covered in filth and utterly unrepentant. “Oh, my God, you were *adorable!*” Matthew was laughing a little but it was a good natured, happy sound.

“Ugh,” Gilbert managed with a blush and kept walking up the stairs, Matthew following him but obviously amused.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Gil! I bet you were a great kid.”

Gilbert rolled his eyes. “Yeah, down right angelic.”

“Angel, huh?” Matthew said, considering and Gilbert looked at him askance. “That fits.”

“What?”

Matthew’s grin turned just a little wicked. “Congrats, you have a new pet name. Now we’re even.”

“And you picked *angel*? For *me*?” Gilbert asked, incredulous as he opened the door of his room. He flicked on the lights, winced at the brightness, then used the dimmer to turn it down. He tossed the wipe into a nearby trash bin.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Well, for one people used to joke that I was a demon before they started calling me War. For another, I’m not a particularly good person, Matthew.” He didn’t say anything immediately in response. Rather, after walking further into the room, he just stopped and stared at him.

“What?”

“You really think you’re not a good person?” Matthew said and it was confused.

“Yeah? I mean, I try to be a *decent* person, sure, but not being an asshole to people for no reason doesn’t make me a good person; it just means I’m not a dick.” Gilbert closed his door behind him.

Matthew looked serious as he walked to Gilbert and put his hands on his chest. He pushed him back until he was pressed against the door and didn’t protest when Gilbert automatically put his hands low on his waist. He said from a close distance, “I am going to call you angel because *I* think you’re a good person. I don’t give a fuck that the same idiots who think that all you are is War also would call you a demon because that’s not who you are and I’m not the only one that knows that.”

You are mine.

Matthew kissed him and a swell of possessiveness filled him. Ancient, basic instinct, triggered by Matthew’s version of understated, violent caring, tried to override basic sense

enough to get his boyfriend to do any number of things with him in which a bed would be nice but non-essential. Gilbert pulled him closer, deepened the kiss, and Matthew melted into him. His hands moved up his chest to loop around his neck with a sigh.

Gilbert broke away and unthinkingly said against his mouth, "Get in my bed, Matthew." There was a beat of stunned silence on his part and Gilbert rushed to quickly say, "Sorry. I meant—"

"Gil?" Matthew said before leaning up to briefly kiss him. He straightened, grabbed Gilbert's hands, and started walking backwards towards his bed, eyes not leaving his. "I have no clue what I'm doing and I want to make sure you like being with me. I like it when you mark me and I think I like it when you tell me what to do in here. We can talk about doing something new, but I promise to tell you if I don't want to do something or if I don't like something. I want to know what you like, too. If you want me, I want you to tell me.

"Besides," he continued, releasing his hand as he sat down and started pushing himself backwards towards the center of the bed. Gilbert followed him, climbing onto the bed and crawling towards him. "We'd already established that we're going to make out and I trust you to stick to that. I know it's hypocritical for me to say this, but you can stop being so polite now."

Gilbert stopped being polite.

So, um. Matthew *might* have underestimated just how much Gilbert had been holding himself back. Maybe. Just a little.

Gilbert's expression tightened immediately and Matthew recognized it as the one he'd worn after each sparring match on Thursday night. "Lay down," he said quietly and Matthew did, their gazes still locked together. Gilbert then very deliberately scanned down his body. He had let Gilbert kneel between his thighs without thinking, despite the slight pull of his jeans.

"You," he continued, leaning down to kiss him but avoided his mouth to say along his jaw, "think I'm a good person. You want me to tell you what I like, when I want you, *how* I want you."

He kept moving, whispering against the skin of neck now that Matthew easily offered to him. He paused to almost certainly bite the already existing mark and *holy fuck*.

Matthew jolted, hands releasing the blanket he had been holding on to as an anchor to slide around Gilbert's body to rest on his back. "Y-yes," he confirmed but the syllable broke in his mouth.

"Those things are mutually exclusive, *Liebling*." He started kissing further down his neck and ran a hand down his side, causing a shiver to run through him.

"Do you want to hurt me without my consent?" Matthew managed.

“Absolutely not. I don’t even want to hurt you with your consent.” He lightly squeezed his side and nuzzled into his neck. “I don’t want to do anything without your consent. You’re mine, Mattie. I take care of what’s mine. If you want to explore that, we’re going to have to talk through a lot before I would be comfortable with it.”

Matthew had been going for a simple no and ended up with kink negotiation. He hugged him close and scooped himself down enough to kiss his forehead. “Okay. Then whatever you want to do to me doesn’t make you a bad person. Oh, you might not be very *nice*, but you’re not bad.” Gilbert lifted his head and looked at him, nonplussed. “What? Just because I haven’t been with anyone doesn’t mean I’m clueless about some important stuff.”

“God, but you’re dangerous,” he muttered before adjusting and finally kissing him. Any thought of inquiring into what that statement had meant flew from his mind as Gilbert pressed him into the bed, body settling on him in a way that should have probably been alarming, but he trusted him. He pulled him closer, ran his fingers through his hair.

Matthew figured out that he liked kissing a lot. He didn’t have to think about anything, could just relax into it and it felt so good. Well, he had to think about one thing.

Where the hell was his supposed to put his hands?

Matthew was happy that he was able to touch him, that they shared that, and wanted to keep doing it but was incredibly self-conscious about it. He was torn between wanting to hold on to him to steady himself, run a hand down his front, or put a hand at his hips where he thought his shirt had ridden up a little.

He was still debating with like 20 percent of his mind when he noticed something about Gilbert’s back. Either tattoos rose more off the skin than Matthew expected or something else caused his skin to have that texture. He stilled and Gilbert tensed in response, definitely felt where his hand rested. “Gil?” he asked, concerned.

“Car accident. A tattoo covers it,” he said, voice strained and more reserved than Matthew was expecting. He pushed himself up until he was sitting on his heels. This bothered him, upset him and Matthew hadn’t meant to do that. He was already following him when Gilbert started, eyes averted, “If it bothers you—“

“No,” Matthew said, upright and taking Gilbert’s face in his hands so that he would look at him and see he was telling the truth. “No. I’m sorry, I should have noticed before now. I just wanted to know if you were okay, if I could touch you. I’m sorry.”

Gilbert sighed and Matthew watched his shoulders drop. “No, I’m sorry. I *know* you’re not the kind of person to care. It’s just...been a problem before and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Who the fuck would stop kissing Gilbert because of a scar? “I don’t know who you’ve been with before now, but if they stopped kissing *you* over something as simple as this then they were a fucking idiot.” That startled a laugh from him.

“Well, you’re not wrong.” Gilbert kissed him again and Matthew urged him back, followed his movement until he was straddling him.

When they were sitting upright with Matthew in his lap, he held Gilbert still. He pulled back, taller than him like this, and looked over his cruelly beautiful face. Gilbert moved his hands over his back as he shook his head. “Terminal stupidity,” he muttered and kissed him again.

At length, Gilbert pulled him closer against him and settled him more firmly in his lap. He was hard, they both had been for a while, and the change made him gasp and loose a started noise. Gilbert began kissing down his neck again as he hugged him, the skin there easier for him to reach than before. When he lightly bit him where his neck met his shoulder, Matthew was pretty sure he moaned and very sure that he had rolled his hips against Gilbert’s.

They both froze at that, looked at each other.

“Sorry—“ Matthew cut himself off as Gilbert put hands on a hip and thigh and *moved*. He found himself suddenly looking at the ceiling, his thighs to either side of Gilbert’s waist, and Gilbert’s voice in his ear.

“I want to make you do that again.” He kissed the skin below his ear and said, “Why are you apologizing?”

He kept up the steady attention to his neck and Matthew let out a shaky laugh. “Guess you don’t want me to be quiet?”

“Hell no. Wanna hear you.” He pulled Matthew’s shirt so that the collar stretched a little and carefully bit him in the same place as before. Matthew was more prepared for it, but he still whimpered and moved against him.

“Come back here,” he managed and lightly pulled at Gilbert’s hair to get them kissing again. He silently urged Gilbert to rest more heavily on top of him with the press of his hands and widening of his thighs, liking the solid feeling of him. Matthew didn’t stop the moans from rising in the back of his throat as Gilbert did as he asked and licked into his mouth. *Fuck*, but this was amazing—

Gilbert eventually broke the kiss and at Matthew’s instant whine he breathlessly said, “Wait a second, baby.”

Matthew immediately relaxed against the bed and his hands began moving in soothing lines. “Are you okay, angel?”

Gilbert laughed lightly, shook his head. “Too good, actually.” He kissed Matthew’s cheek and said, “If we want to keep this light, I need to slow down. Either that or I’m going to have to get up and go to the bathroom in about two minutes.”

“Why would you...oh.” Matthew really hadn’t been paying attention to his own body. He, rather belatedly, uncrossed his legs from behind Gilbert’s back, realizing he had been arching into him. “Sorry.”

Gilbert kissed his cheek again and pushed himself up to look at him, smirk on his face. "This is another one of those things you don't have to apologize for. I'm not complaining, just want to make sure we don't go further than we intended."

Warmth filled him and Matthew leaned up to kiss his cheek. "Thank you."

"Mattie, it costs me nothing to not be an asshole and break your trust. Basic decency, remember?" He shifted and all but flopped onto his back beside him. "Can we cuddle?"

What kind of question...? "Yes, please." Matthew moved over and curled himself against his side. He rested his head against his shoulder and threw an arm over him. "This okay?"

"A little closer?" Matthew moved so that he was half on top of him, with their legs tangled together. Gilbert wrapped his arm around him and seemed to settle. "Perfect."

They laid there for a moment and Matthew started tracing nonsense patterns on Gilbert's chest, smiling to himself. After a long while, he said, "I like this a lot."

"Me too." He lightly squeezed him and Matthew relaxed further against him. They fell quiet again and Matthew felt no need to break the silence. He couldn't stop smiling, utterly content, and felt like he was on the cusp of sleeping. The only thing that kept him awake was his constantly moving hand growing more familiar with the man against him. Gilbert did nothing to stop him, the hand he had on his back moving in slow, absent strokes, which was not helping him stay awake.

Would it really be so bad if he did fall asleep?

No, Matthew wanted to be awake, didn't want to end the date prematurely because he couldn't stay alert and Gilbert wanted to make sure he got home fine. So Matthew moved to look up at Gilbert, chin resting on his free hand now. "I'm happy we came here instead of going to my dorm. I don't think my bed would have had enough room for this. And I don't have to worry about Lovi being here."

Gilbert gave him a soft look and used a hand to tuck some of his hair behind an ear. "Those are definite bonuses. There's also the fact that there aren't a bunch of doors slamming or people moving in the hallways. We're actually alone here."

That was true. If Lovino had not been there and even if Matthew already warned him away, he would have wondered if every person walking in front of his door was his roommate coming back. He hummed in agreement before pushing himself up, lounging on the bed rather than Gilbert. He cupped his face and said, "This is great, but I am about a minute away from falling asleep on you."

Gilbert frowned, the hand behind Matthew stroking his back again. "Are you tired? Do you want to go home?"

"I'm not so much tired as you are an extremely comfortable pillow," he said with a smile, letting his hand fall from Gilbert's face and trail down his neck to rest on his chest again. "I was hoping to start kissing you again."

Gilbert's lips curled mischievously. "Sounds good to me."

Matthew wasn't sure *how* he did it, but Gilbert had him on his back in no time, mouth claiming his. But, as Gilbert intertwined their fingers and held Matthew's hands against the bed, he decided he really didn't care.

Feliciano knew he was lucky. He had a family that loved him, a talent that he loved doing and that a university was willing to pay for his studies over, and he was pretty damn cute. He knew he was far from perfect--a little forgetful, a bit self-absorbed, and not one for a lot of unnecessary critical thinking—but he tried to make people around him feel loved and liked making other people happy. In short, he tried to be a good person.

Was it really so much to ask that he have an ounce of the romantic luck that his brother and friend had?

He had waylaid Lovino that afternoon to see if he wanted to go out that night. To say he looked wrecked would be an understatement. His brother looked like he needed to sleep for a week, but he had been smiling as he'd said, "Tonio stopped being an idiot."

Feliciano was incredibly happy for him, wanting him of all people to have someone to support him after all the shit he had been through. Lovino tried to keep how much the past five years had worn on him from Feliciano simply because he was younger, but he was aware that he was probably the only person who openly loved him unconditionally before college and that he just wasn't enough to keep him from being lonely. Even if Matthew hadn't been the genuinely nice person that he was, he would have loved him for how he treated Lovino alone.

Speaking of Matthew, he had apparently just missed him as he had left for his date with Gilbert. He was hoping that he would be able to get the full story tomorrow at lunch or dinner. He had watched the general proceedings of last night from the side once he figured out that Matthew was trying to make Antonio jealous after that initial shock of seeing them together. Feliciano had yet to meet Gilbert personally, but he didn't doubt that the pale boy who had arrived shortly after Matthew put his plan into action and subsequently *stalked* onto the dance floor after him was the person he had heard about.

Feliciano had left pretty quickly after that, finding a guy he couldn't remember well to hook up with thanks in part to the change in music. He didn't quite understand why upperclassmen suddenly became a lot more open to hurried flings after Matthew's redheaded friend changed the music, but he sure as hell wasn't complaining.

What? Just because he was hung up on Ludwig didn't mean he wasn't going to enjoy himself in the meantime.

Anyway, his absence at the party meant that he had apparently missed a fight that involved Matthew and his newly christened boyfriend. He hadn't known about the gossip sites that Lovino had mentioned spread the news and some rumors, but he sure as hell found out after asking one of older acquaintances on campus. To his surprise, all but one seemed to be

“under construction” at the moment, and the one that worked had no mention of Gilbert or Matthew.

That had been strange, but Feliciano had shrugged and gone about trying to figure out how he was going to spend the evening. It had still been too early to go out, so he decided to actually get some work done for once. He didn't like being in too quiet spaces and chose to go to the student commons, giving him the option of people watching when his English homework inevitably bored him.

He apparently wasn't the only person to have this idea.

Feliciano sighed as he saw that every table had at least one person sitting there, eating their dinner, hanging out with friends, working, or some combination of all of the above. He didn't mind sitting with someone he didn't know usually but he didn't feel like it right that second. His eyes scanned the room, looking for a familiar face.

He'd almost given up when he spotted someone who made him think his luck was changing.

Feliciano took a steadying breath and didn't let himself hesitate as he made a beeline to a familiar blonde's table. “Ludwig?” he asked (knowing damn well who he was) to get his attention. He looked up from his computer, clearly startled, and Feliciano smiled at him. “Hey. Do you mind if I sit with you?”

“Not at all.” It was a small table, so Feliciano pulled out the chair across from him and sat down. “How are you?”

“I'm good, just trying to get some work done before maybe going out later. You? Ve, I'm kinda surprised to see you here.”

Ludwig raised his eyebrows at him. “I'm fine. I needed a place to be for a couple of hours.” Feliciano was about to ask why when Ludwig preempted him. “Matthew came over with Gilbert. My brother is...well, I wanted to be elsewhere,” he finished with a light blush.

Get it, Mattie! Feliciano thought at his friend who had inadvertently continued to be the best wingman when it came to Ludwig. He hadn't be able to get a clear read on Ludwig's sexuality, though he was leaning towards thinking the boy might just swing his way.

What *had* been apparent was just how oblivious he could be when it came to people flirting with him directly. He had sent just about every signal short of wiggling against him and outright saying that he was DTF, but he had been completely unfazed. No, Feliciano had to come in at an angle with the blond heartthrob.

So he winced and said, “That's rough. But surely you could have crashed at a friend's? Ve, I'm sure you...” Feliciano had been paying closer attention to Ludwig than he usually did with people in conversation, so he saw when his blush deepened. “What?”

“I, uh. I have not had a chance to meet a lot of people.” He admitted with a shrug, but Feliciano still saw the embarrassment there.

“So? You don’t need to meet a lot of people to have friends…” Ludwig winced and Feliciano came to a decision. “This is ridiculous. That’s it, I’m adopting you. I’m your friend and I’m going to help you make more friends. What are you doing tonight?”

He looked poleaxed and Feliciano had to fight the urge to giggle. “N-nothing, work maybe? But—“

“God, you’re worse than Mattie. Nope, you’re coming partying with me. Have you been to a party since the year started?”

“No, but that does not seem like the most efficient way to make friends.”

“How do you know that without having been to one, hmm?” As Ludwig still seemed shocked and vaguely uncomfortable, Feliciano leaned forward and lightly touched his hand. “Ve, if you don’t like it, I won’t push but we just started college; you should have fun while you can. I understand that life gets sucky once you have to go out and be a responsible adult.” He wrinkled his nose at him and took his hand back.

Ludwig stared at him for a long moment before stiffening. “I appreciate the offer, but I do not want you to waste your time on me out of pity, Feliciano.”

Well, excuse me! Feliciano immediately thought, taken aback. Then he met Ludwig’s eyes, cold, yes, but also…lonely. He was scared.

So Feliciano let his initial reaction go and held that intimidating gaze with some difficulty. Softly, he said, “Ludwig, this isn’t pity. I want to be your friend. I thought I made that clear on movie night, at least. And spending time with you would not be a waste in any way.”

Ludwig frowned, looked at him a moment longer, then seemed to deflate. “I see. I apologize for the assumption. I would like to be your friend as well; I am just unaccustomed to such offers.”

He smiled easily at him. Yes, an angle was the only way he would be able to get close to Ludwig at all. And hey, if they didn’t end up sleeping together he would probably get a great friend out of this venture! “Great! Don’t worry about it. Will you come out with me?”

“…Where would I put my things?”

“My room.”

“I do not believe I am property dressed—“

“Oh, no. Trust me, you’ll do just fine.” He was in a white button up and jeans, the shirt at least doing nothing to hide his size and the fact he was *fit*. Yeah, no, pity was the furthest thing from Feliciano’s mind when he looked at him. “And if you feel the need to be responsible, it’s still really early. We can just work on stuff until a more reasonable hour.”

“It is 9:30!”

“If you need coffee I know a place.” Ludwig still looked on the fence, so Feliciano leaned forward, blinked wide eyes at him, and pouted. “Please come with me?”

He looked railroaded, which Feliciano counted as a win. “...I suppose I should try it at least once.”

Feliciano grinned at him, happy to finally have a direct connection to the boy. Now, it was just a matter of getting him to stick around.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Look, I don't know if a place like Dickinson's Diner actually exists. If it doesn't, it should and I feel very strongly about this. Also, sorry if the chapter was slow but character building is important!

(Yes, I know I'm the worst for updating this but I put myself on a schedule now to write other things.)

Me, banging pots together, screaming: We as a society collectively need higher standards for acceptable dating behavior! Basic human decency should be basic, not radical! It costs zero dollars to not be an asshole!

Title lyrics are from K.I.D.'s “I Wish I Was Your Cigarette.” "Come bring me love. I can't count the things that I want to do to you. I can't even say what you're putting me through every night."

Chapter 13: Friend Like Me

Chapter Notes

I have been. Not Well. Hahaha...ha. Look, I snapped okay. It was past time. Short chapter because this part was ready FOREVER but the rest of the week refused to come together. Wanted to let y'all know I'm still kicking.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lovino woke with a groan, body aching for several reasons, most prominent being the shitty mattress that was standard issue in the dorms. He glared at the white ceiling, seriously contemplating the cost of a mattress topper since his back needed all the help it could get.

His thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the room's door, the clicks of the handle and automatic lock loud in the otherwise quiet of a Sunday morning. Matthew was quiet as he always was in the mornings, though Lovino was surprised to hear him up and about when he was still MIA when Lovino decided to go to sleep.

He snuck a peek, trying to get a feel for the situation. Nothing looked out of the ordinary with his hair up and usual loose jeans. He was putting something away in his meager closet and Lovino spotted the tiniest hint of pale tan at the curve of his shirt, stubbornly sticking to the red fabric. *So that's how it is.*

"Well, well, well," Lovino drawled and Matthew immediately tensed across the room. "Looks like someone had a good time last night."

Matthew cleared his throat and then turned to him with burning cheeks, hand coming up automatically to his neck. "How could you...?"

"Make-up on your collar," Lovino said with a smirk. He sat up and turned to sit on the edge of his bed. The mattress was raised high enough that he could swing his feet giddily, the fabric of his pajama pants swishing pleasantly. "Sooo..."

Matthew hid his face in his hands for a moment, shaking his head as he said, long-suffering, "Good morning, Lovino. I'm fine, how are you?"

"I'm great! Want to know about your date, though. Spill."

His friend dropped his hands with a sigh, the effect lost by the smile he couldn't quite hide. "Okay, okay," He awkwardly went to run a hand through his hair, only to stop when his hand hit the tie. He fussily pulled it out of his hair as he quickly strode across the room to his desk chair and turned around to face Lovino. "It was a good night. We had dinner and went to a movie down at Victory Street, the most queer-friendly part of town apparently."

Matthew smiled freely, eyes losing the embarrassed shiftiness at the memory and fingers playing with the black elastic.

“Nice,” Lovino nodded approvingly. A proper date then; he would have to take mental notes if he were going to plan his with Antonio.

He was the one supposed to plan right? Since he asked?

A problem for later.

“And?” he prompted, because Matthew clearly wasn’t saying everything but Lovino could tell from his happiness and fidgeting that he wanted to. “Go on, I want to hear all of it.”

“It was really great!” Matthew gushed, flushing. “He took me to an old-style diner that had queer historical figures as its theme that was super cool and the food was really good! He was genuinely apologetic and upset about how people treat me and he’s just...ugh!” Matthew put his face in his hands again, shoulders rising to his ears as he shook his head a little.

Lovino took this in for a beat then said, “You like him.”

Matthew laughed but it was harsh and Lovino startled at the sound. He looked up and his mouth quirked sardonically. “Yes. Far too much.”

Lovino narrowed his eyes. “Which means...?”

“It’s just... I shouldn’t feel like this after one date, right? I shouldn’t like him this much?”

“...Why not? It’s a first date; if you weren’t excited about him then why the fuck would you bother with a second?” Matthew stared at him. “What? Seriously, why would you? Do you know how many other guys there are in the world?”

“But I never felt this way about anyone else before,” Matthew admitted quietly. “I don’t want to mess it up because I’m too eager. That’s how dating works right?”

It was Lovino’s turn to stare at him. His best friend played with the hair tie nervously, face so sincere, and *God*, but he was young. There was only a two-year age difference between them but it felt like longer as Lovino realized he might actually have the answer to this one.

“Mattie,” he started gently, “you don’t have to have experienced something similar before to know that what you’re feeling now is real. And you’ve only ever been yourself with him, right?” Matthew nodded. “So why would you trying to change your behavior to fit someone else work?”

“I get where those ideas come from. Hell, I was told something like that from an ex when he broke it off. But you won’t be happy hiding who you are and Gilbert should be just as enthusiastic as you. You’ve spent the most time with him; do you think he’s a good person?”

“Absolutely,” Matthew said, straightening with a fierce expression. *Interesting.*

“Then he either will be happy you’re being honest or will let you know if he’s uncomfortable. Look, I tried to communicate with Tonio and he *lied*.” A feeling of unease twisted his stomach but Lovino ignored it. “You saw where it led for us. Don’t hide what you’re feeling from Gilbert if you can help it. Would I go and declare my love for him tomorrow? No, that’s a bit much. But if you want to talk to him, talk to him. Boys are pretty good at just not responding if they don’t want to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Matthew said. “So, I can text him that I had fun last night and want to see him again soon?”

“*Yes!*”

“Cool!” Matthew whipped his phone out and typed a quick text out. He hit send then half collapsed back into his seat. “Thank you,” he said, sincerely.

“What friends do. Now, you gonna explain that makeup or nah?”

“...we went back to his place after the movie.” At Lovino’s expectant look, Matthew rolled his eyes but grinned. “We made out a little.”

“A little?”

Matthew’s smile widened. “Okay, a lot. It was... I didn’t...”

The happy expression faded to one of mild confusion and Lovino wanted the groan. What now? “Yes?”

Matthew licked his lips and found his hands fascinating as they twisted in his lap. “I liked it. A lot.”

“... Ooookay? Is that a bad thing?” Lovino said slowly because he didn’t understand why Matthew would be bothered by that. He would rather not put his foot in his mouth with this when Matthew was so good at being there for him.

“No. Just unexpected?”

Lovino did a slow blink at him. “You didn’t expect to enjoy making out with Gilbert. The boy you’ve been mooning over for like a month. Who is also your boyfriend.”

Matthew winced. “Alright, it doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“...Did he make you uncomfortable or—”

“No! Nothing like that. He was really open about boundaries and us being open communicators and *he* stopped us, not me.”

Wheels were still turning in Lovino’s head, still not getting what the problem was here. “Did you not want to stop?”

“No, I did.” Matthew glanced up to see Lovino’s dumbfounded look and sighed. He rubbed at his face and said, “Okay, so I didn’t want us to sleep together on the first date. Like I would have been extremely uncomfortable if he had hinted at that. But because he didn’t, I just couldn’t think to stop kissing him.

“And I don’t understand how I want him like that! I’ve never wanted anyone before like this and I don’t want to specifically sleep with him but... I want to touch him. I loved kissing him. And I didn’t want to stop kissing him, no matter if that led to something else, even knowing that it wouldn’t. Does that make sense? It doesn’t sound like it makes sense.” Matthew was scowling at nothing in the middle distance and Lovino got a clue.

Not for me but for you? Yeah.

“Okay, a couple of things here,” Matthew looked at him, sheepish. He looked at him with such trust and Lovino felt a warm feeling in his chest, because he knew he’d felt the same way before. Lovino had never had a friend like this, and deep affection swelled in him. He swallowed it down, and said, “First, there’s nothing wrong about your reaction to him. Like, even at all. Second, a lot of shit changes when you feel safe. You knew nothing more was going to happen and maybe that let you consider that it was okay to want something more.

“Third, and this is a big one.” Lovino took a deep breath and said what had been lingering in his mind since he met Matthew. “Have you heard the term ‘asexual’ before?”

Matthew frowned at him. “You mean like bacteria?”

“No, that’s asexual reproduction, not asexuality. It’s like how I say I’m bi and Feli says he’s pan. Asexual people say they’re ‘ace.’ It means someone who doesn’t experience sexual attraction to any gender.”

Matthew just stared at him for a long moment before asking quietly, “That’s a thing?”

“Yep. And more common than you’d think.”

“But, with Gilbert—”

“It’s also a spectrum, meaning that the level of non-attraction can vary. For some people, sexual attraction only comes online once they fall in love or at least get to know a person. And people on the spectrum can have different perspectives when it comes to sex. Just because you’re not attracted to people doesn’t automatically mean you don’t have a sex drive, though some people don’t. And you can still want a romantic partner.”

“Oh,” Matthew said, barely audible. “You sound like you know a lot about it.”

It was Lovino’s turn to look sheepish. “Honestly? I didn’t until I met you. Then I did some research to better understand how you might experience things. I’m far from an expert, though, but am happy to listen if you want help processing this or something.”

Matthew looked visibly touched and it made Lovino happy he’d looked into this. “Thank you. It does sound accurate, I guess. I didn’t even realize what I wasn’t feeling until well.

You know. I'll do some digging, too."

"Great. Bottom line though, experiencing something new doesn't mean it's wrong. And God knows I support peak sluttiness if that's something you want with him." Matthew choked on air. "What? Surely you didn't expect me, *me* who basically hopped on Tonio's dick at the first chance, to not support you exploring your sexuality? Especially with a guy that makes you happy and comfortable?"

"Yeah, okay, point taken." Matthew's face cleared and he looked shy before he said, "Can I have a hug?"

"Stupid bastard, of *course* you can." Lovino basically launched himself into the larger boy's lap.

Matthew wrapped his arms around him and giggled a little, but he was relaxed and cheerful, better than where he started for sure. He murmured into Lovino's shoulder, "Thanks, Lovi."

"Anytime, Mattie." Lovino said as he squeezed him back, thinking to himself, *Anything for my family.*

Chapter End Notes

The "hey, you might be ace" conversation was modeled on one my friend gave me when I was 20, with some of my own lessons thrown in. I know Gen Z has a greater awareness of these things, but write what you know, ya know?

You may notice that the chapter count for this story is set. Part of my years' long block was figuring out how we got from here to the beginning of the sequel which will kick off at the end of this school year. Turns out I had conditioned myself into a hole where I could only ever write 10k plus chapters part of a fully thought out story and that's... not how things have to be.

So! This story, the beginning of everything in this series, ends after the next chapter. This story will be followed by a series of short stories/one shots that have fun/important scenes for the rest of Matthew's freshman year that are key background for understanding the characters and where they are in the originally planned sequel. I would if I could post the prologue of the sequel (which as been written for actual years), but alas I cannot because spoilers for the main arc here.

The chapter title is exactly from the song you think it's from, for no reason but I really like writing this friendship.

See y'all sooner rather than later!

Author's Note and DGC Outline

Chapter Summary

Author Explains themselves! And the rest of the story.

Hey folks.

I'm sorry that I'm actually now planning to not finish this or any of my Hetalia stories. It took me a long time to come to terms with this, but both you and I deserve to be free of this limbo. I've grown and changed a lot since I first cut my teeth on writing for these characters and the ongoing pandemic has made me reevaluate what I really want to be doing and feeling. While they'll stay in my heart, I also have creatively moved on. I'm grateful for you all for reading and finding joy in my stories.

That said, I don't want to leave you without closure on my stories. I'm going through and posting an outline for each story what I had planned to do, along with any content that was already drafted.

For Don't Get Cut particularly, there's an issue because a hard drive death in 2021 actually means I lost the 5k words I had for the final chapter already. I also can't find my handwritten notes for this chapter?? So that sucks. I'll do my best to outline what I can below.

Additionally, the stories and the sequel would have led up to an OT3 relationship between Matthew, Gilbert, and Alistair. If you don't want to read about that, feel free to ignore all of "chapter 16." Someone on FFN noted that the title of the sequel was from "Bad Romance," which was about being in love with your best friend. And they were right on the money. The only person who's POV we will NOT get from this series until the sequel is Alistair's for that reason.

All the best, and I hope you are well.

CGL/darkhuntress13 (which, sorry, this url makes me laugh bc I'm agender haha. Oh, and I changed my psued here just to keep these works and my danmei works separate)

Chapter 15 Outline

(Ludwig POV) Matthew and Ludwig meet up for their regular study session. Ludwig was waiting for things to be weird between them, but Matthew is just going to act like he's not very much dating Gilbert. This is very reassuring to him, and he mentions that Feliciano wanted him to come to a party later that week. Matthew encourages him to get out if he wants to, but leave if he feels too uncomfortable.

(Matthew POV) Matthew meets up with Alistair who teases him about dating Gilbert. Matthew expresses some of his lingering concerns, to which Alistair actually is very insightful about calming. They tease him some more about the chemistry between him and Gilbert that was the talk of their MMA club for the past week, asking if he's planning on coming back. Matthew pushes them away and rolls his eyes. They confirm that they'll come to Matthew's game on Friday.

(Lovino POV) Date with Antonio going well enough, but he's still thinking about how uncomfortable he had been in his conversation with Matthew about how he and Antonio don't actually... talk. About a lot. They hang out and they fuck, but what does he really know about him? What does Lovino know about Antonio. He does his best to hide his concerns, knowing this is literally their *first* date. But the concern lingers and goes unaddressed, even as they end up fucking back at Antonio's later. Lovino just decides to attempt to enjoy the relationship for what it was and stop worrying so much. He doesn't want to be needy.

(Gilbert POV) Matthew's hockey game. He's excited to be there as a supportive boyfriend (A/N: serial monogamist alert!) and is greatly impressed to see Matthew in action. While he was impressive in a fight, he's a *god* on the ice, and Gilbert wishes he could see his face unobstructed. Ludwig and (mostly) Alistair tease him, but they all stand, ready to come to Matthew's defense when another player takes a swing at him or even dares to check him. After the game, Matthew seems no worse for wear and is very happy to see his friends and boyfriend waiting for him.

(Matthew POV) Party. Lovino hadn't been able to make his game on Friday due to his own conflicting match, but they do go to meet up with their boyfriends at a party on Saturday. Ludwig spots Matthew early on and latches onto him like he's his life raft, but Feliciano arrives soon enough and is able to draw him away into a casual conversation. Matthew takes his place by Gilbert's side, in the bubble that being around "The Four Horsemen" create at a party, and feels a lot of people watching him. The chapter ends with him feeling like he had unintentionally entered the upper echelons of his college's social circle and being apprehensive about it. But then Gilbert kisses him and he forgets his concerns for the moment.

(A/N: End! No song for this chapter, and that's part of what held me up. I've since abandoned connecting individual chapters with songs for this exact reason.)

Series And Sequel Summaries and Portions

Title: Gray Areas and Expectations

A/N: Y'all know when I said there wouldn't be angst? Well I tried but this chapter hit a little too close to my own issues. I'm sorry. Warning apply to Matthew for: internalized aphobia, depression, internalized rape culture (A/N 2023: oh wow. I was in my angsty era over my sexuality. Things did get better!)

Outline: the five times Matthew said yes to intimacy. This would include: seeing each other naked, hand jobs, sleeping together (without sex), publicly making out, and blow jobs. Matthew does consent to these things, but he is more nervous than he lets on and pushes himself because he's afraid that failing to do as Gilbert suggested would jeopardize their relationship. He also has not told Gilbert about the fact that he thinks he's on the asexuality spectrum, afraid that he wouldn't want him anymore.

They had been in Gilbert's room after enjoying a Saturday night in with a movie marathon, a much deserved study break. Now, Matthew arched his neck, urging Gilbert to keep marking him in that way that sent him pangs of intoxicating satisfaction every time he caught sight of the bruises in the mirror. Gilbert's hands clutched at his waist and leg, pressing Matthew to him, familiar after the past month. His bare torso carried the remembrances of Gilbert's teeth, his spine tingled in anticipation of the praises he would earn, his hands tangled in Gilbert's soft hair, urging him on. His hips jerked without his permission against Gilbert at an unexpected bite and he felt Gilbert's chortling breath against the spit-slick area.

Maybe it was the stress he had been under as finals approached but he'd never felt this... needy. God, but he craved this. There was nothing reasonable about it. He *needed* Gilbert's hands, Gilbert's mouth, Gilbert's body, Gilbert's tenderness and mind and heart. Gilbert, Gilbert, Gilbert.

When Gilbert shifted to kiss him on the mouth once more, Matthew responded with unprecedented desperation. He heard his boyfriend's breath catch and a rumbling moan from deep in his throat and Matthew claimed those prizes as his own. Gilbert, the only person to ever make Matthew feel like this, like he would fly out of his skin with desire, *wanted him back*. That revelation would never cease to surprise and thrill and amaze him.

The kiss slowed and Gilbert pulled away to look at him. Matthew had come to expect this habit of Gilbert's whenever they touched like this, the tendency to pause for a moment and stare at him like he was the miracle when in reality it was the other way around. Even now, he had to fight not to squirm as Gilbert's eyes roamed the mess he had made of him. Matthew distracted himself by tracing the lines of Gilbert's jaw, neck, chest and stomach, appreciating the privilege to touch him like this.

He was so beautiful.

Still, the calm stretched longer than usual and Matthew took a breath to ask if something was wrong when Gilbert said, “Mattie, I want to try something.”

Matthew blinked up at him, confused but willing to listen. Voice rough, he said, “Okay. What is it?”

One of Gilbert’s hands shifted to his hip as he stared into Matthew’s eyes and answered. “I want to fuck you.” When Matthew’s eyes widened and his body froze in response, Gilbert hastened to add, “Or for you to fuck me. I just want...Mattie?”

Oh, God, oh God. A cold sweat broke out along his spine and Matthew remembered another voice, another body pressed up against his and he couldn’t, he didn’t want—

There was suddenly more room to breathe because Gilbert wasn’t on top of him anymore and that more than anything made Matthew panic because this *wasn’t* anyone else, it was *Gilbert* and Matthew should be *thrilled* that Gilbert wanted him like that, wanted to be close to him and oh, God, Gilbert had asked and he wouldn’t want to be with someone who wouldn’t, who was broken and he *had* to—

“Shhh, *Liebling*, calm down. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—“

Matthew shook himself and distantly remembered watching Gilbert sitting up beside him and taking his hand. He needed to salvage the situation, needed to make sure Gilbert still wanted him, so he sat up and said, voice a little too high, “It’s fine! Y-you can fuck me if you want! I-I just wasn’t expecting you to say that. I’m s-sorry I—“

“Matthew.” He looked up to meet Gilbert’s eyes and saw nothing but care and concern in them, empty of the lust he was expecting. The humiliation became complete as Matthew felt his own burn with tears. *Why* did he have to fuck this up? He had been doing so well, had come so far. Why hadn’t he just said yes?

Shaken, Matthew tried to continue talking. “Please, Gil. I—“

“No, Matthew. I think we’re done for the night.” Gilbert said. His tone was gentle, but all Matthew heard were the words *we’re done* over and over in his head.

Gilbert didn’t quite know how he fucked this up, but the situation went about as FUBAR as it could get as Matthew covered his mouth, squeezed his eyes shut, and *sobbed*.

Gilbert was at a loss for what to do, speechless with his hands hovering in front of him. He wanted nothing more than to wrap himself around Matthew in comfort, but he was terrified of upsetting him more. What did Matthew need? Would touching him make it worse or better? He had tried so hard to read Matthew’s mood and reactions and he thought that there was something deeper in how he touched him tonight. Gilbert had thought that the request would go like the others but the last thing he ever wanted was to upset his boyfriend. He had been so careful. *Why* was Matthew crying? Why had he frozen and looked like Gilbert had slapped him? What could he do to make this right?

When Matthew curled into a ball and wrapped his arms around himself, Gilbert decided that some action was better than nothing at all. He said softly, “Mattie, would it be okay if I touched you?”

Matthew’s body was wracked with a violent, heaving sob, but he nodded into his legs nonetheless.

Slowly, carefully Gilbert pulled Matthew into his arms. He spoke softly in his native tongue, not knowing what words in English had betrayed him and praying that the sentiment would be clearer when Matthew couldn’t understand the words. “ *My dear one, my treasure, please stop crying. Please tell me what ails you so. I am here for you and I am so sorry, my darling. That’s it, come here and let me hold you. Let me take care of you.* ”

Gilbert didn’t track the minutes as they passed. He had managed to shift the two of them until they were both laying down under the warm blankets. He had coaxed Matthew to turn towards him, his face buried into the crook of his neck as he worked through whatever he was feeling. The sobs quieted as Gilbert rubbed his back and pressed lingering kisses into his hair.

When Matthew finally stilled against him, Gilbert tried English once more. “Mattie?” His boyfriend tensed, letting Gilbert know he was still awake. He pressed another kiss to his head in reassurance, though he wasn’t quite sure if it was for him or Matthew. “ *Liebling*, what do you need right now? Water? A tissue? Just tell me and it is yours.”

“You...” Matthew began before trailing off, voice muffled as he spoke into Gilbert’s skin. “You’re not mad?”

“ *No* , of course not. I am very concerned, but I’m the farthest thing from mad, especially with you. Please, will you talk to me?”

“You’re not going to...” He trailed off and Gilbert heard alarm bells go off in his head.

“Going to what, Mattie?”

“...throw me out?”

Horror curled through him. “ *Absolutely not* . I won’t force you to stay here if you want to go home. I won’t force you to do *anything* , but I would really prefer it if you would stay the night with me after we talk.”

“Oh.” Matthew’s arms tightened around him for a second as he seemed to relax a bit. Quietly, he added. “Okay. Um, in that case, I want to wash up a bit. I’m sorry for crying on you.”

Matthew began pulling away from him, head ducked to try to hide his face. Gilbert caught him and managed to press a kiss to his splotchy, wet cheek. Matthew blinked red, watery eyes at him in surprise as Gilbert said, “You have nothing to be sorry over, *Schätzchen* .”

“Okay. Thank you,” Matthew mumbled as he climbed out of bed. Gilbert watched as bent down to start pulling on his clothes, mind whirring. Where the *hell* had Matthew gotten the

idea that Gilbert would *kick him out* for not fucking him? Or why did he feel pressured to not only say yes, but *beg* him to fuck him when he was clearly uncomfortable with the idea? Who hurt him?

Rage burned as Gilbert thought, *Who do I have to kill?*

Matthew stood in the hallway, undecided as to whether he was going to actually go back to Gilbert right now or head home before he made a bigger fool of himself. He had *cried* on him after freaking out over something as simple as sex. How was intercourse really any different flying apart in Gilbert's hand or mouth? Or vice versa? But no, he had to make a mess of things and fucking *cry* about it. And Gilbert had been...perfect. Absolutely perfect and that was after Matthew had been so desperate for him. If he went back he really might do something that would—

"Matthew?" Startled, Matthew looked down the hallway to see Ludwig, glass of water in hand, at the top of the stairs.

"Ludwig! Hi. Sorry, I was just heading back to—"

"*Mein Gott*, are you well?" Ludwig approached him rapidly, eyes narrowed and darting over his puffy eyes and pale skin. Matthew winced, knowing from the bathroom mirror that he looked like hell. His friend growled, "What did he do to you?"

Matthew's straightened from the slouch he was in, completely taken aback by Ludwig's assumption. "What? Nothing! Gilbert didn't—"

"EAST!" Ludwig shouted as he marched to Gilbert's door and, in that moment, Matthew wished for the void to take him. Angry German followed, completely different from the tenor Gilbert used to sooth him only minutes before, and the sound spurred Matthew into action.

"Wait! I'm okay! Gilbert did nothing wrong!" Matthew shouted as Gilbert opened the door, still clad in nothing but his boxers, brow furrowed in confusion. He ran to get between them, whirling on Ludwig to keep him back. "I'm okay!"

"You are clearly not!" Ludwig's eyes, blazing despite the cool color, zeroed in on his brother once more. "What did you do?"

"I don't know, West." Gilbert said carefully. "We were going to talk about it."

"How could you *not* —!"

"If you would *listen to me*," Matthew said testily, not a fan of being ignored, "you would know he did *nothing wrong*! I am the problem here—"

Ludwig scoffed and Gilbert hastily took his hand. Gently, he said, "You are not a problem, *Schätzchen*."

"Well, I'm the one with the issue here. Gilbert has been *perfect*," he tried again, squeezing his boyfriend's hand but not looking away from his concerned friend. "I'm okay, Ludwig. I

swear.”

Ludwig pursed his lips but slump a little as he relaxed. “All right, Matthew. I...apologize for jumping to conclusions. Goodnight.”

“It’s okay and I know you just care. Thank you, Ludwig.” Matthew said at the same time Gilbert said something to him in German that made Ludwig give a startled laugh and nod before heading down to his room, glass of water still in his hand.

Matthew shut the door and sighed. Looks like he was staying to have this conversation after all.

“Mattie?” He turned around and looked at Gilbert, who in turn was looking both concerned and unsure. “Do you want me to put more clothes on?”

“Um...maybe a shirt?” Matthew requested with a blush, taking off his own jeans so they would at least be equal in this. “It’s just, you’re kind of distracting?”

Gilbert shot him a smirk as he turned to his dresser. “Always good to hear, *Liebling* . And...do you want a shirt? To sleep in, I mean.”

Stay with me? He was asking, smirk faded and eyes serious. If he was asking...then maybe Matthew had been worried over nothing? He tentatively smiled back at him and said, “Yes, please.”

Gilbert sat against the headboard as Matthew settled himself to face him cross-legged on the bed. He then cleared his throat and said, “Matthew, I am not sure what caused your reaction, but I want to start off by saying that I hope you’re not feeling like you did something wrong or are a problem. You are always entitled to your feelings and I will *never* force you to do something you don’t want to do. In fact, I would much prefer if you tell me right away if you are not comfortable with something I am either proposing or doing, and I will stop immediately. Do you understand that?”

Matthew was staring at the bed, fingers tracing endless loops on the sheets. “Yes, I understand. I...remember you first told me that when we started. I know you wouldn’t force me to do something. I only...I wanted to be what you wanted.”

“Did you think forcing yourself to have sex with me was something I wanted?” Gilbert made his voice as gentle as he could, not wanting to come across as accusatory but needing to ask the question. This was important. Matthew shook his head but didn’t say anything further, so Gilbert pressed a little, voicing a concern that had been in the back of his mind since Matthew had left the room. “Matthew, have you ever done something with me out of fear of me leaving you if you didn’t?”

He hoped for a quick denial. What he got was Matthew’s hand stalling on the bed, entire body tensing, and Gilbert felt nauseous, truly sick to his stomach. Horrified, he breathed, “Oh, my God. *Please* , tell me I’m wrong. Tell me I didn’t—“

“No!” Matthew looked up then, eyes widening as he took in Gilbert’s expression. “No, you didn’t pressure me into anything, I swear! I was just a little more nervous about something than I let on at first but I had fun, I promise! I was more comfortable after that and haven’t felt weird about it since and—“

“You thought I would have broken up with you if you didn’t.” Gilbert interrupted, because there was no way around that basic fact, because he *needed* to know if Matthew thought that was all he meant to Gilbert.

“Yes,” Matthew answered quietly. Gilbert put his head in his hands because *fucking hell* . He stayed like that for several moments, processing what his boyfriend just said, what that meant for every prior sexual interaction they had, until Matthew spoke again. “I’m sorry.”

Gilbert’s head snapped up and he lost his control for a second. “Jesus, don’t apologize! You have *nothing* to be sorry over. Have you spent all this time thinking you mean nothing to me? That you’re just someone I’m using to get off?”

“...No. Not all this time.”

He could not believe this. There was no way this was real life. “Fucking *hell* . I know for a fact you would never tell someone else to have sex with another person for any reason besides wanting to do it.” A look of revulsion on his face confirmed it. “Exactly. Why are you being harder on yourself than you would for literally every other human being?”

“I don’t know! It felt different, more urgent? And I-I know you like me and care about me now. I don’t really understand why, but I know you do.”

“You are a smart, kind, gorgeous, *amazing* person, Matthew. You are not some hook-up, you are my *boyfriend* . I would want enthusiastic consent from someone I met at a random party. Why would you think I wouldn’t want the same from you?”

“It’s not that I think you don’t respect me, Gil.” Matthew looked down and Gilbert wanted to take him in his arms again. “I’m just not very familiar with how relationships work. I had been kicked out by someone before because I didn’t want to have sex and—“

“ *What ?!*”

“—And I don’t think I feel sexual attraction like most people—“

“You’re *ace?!* ”

“But I...I really like you and was scared that you would only want someone who was normal. So, I tried to be normal.”

All Gilbert could do was stare at him, slack jawed and damn near catatonic with shock. After a long moment, Matthew seemed to flinch and he started to get up. “I’m sorry. I’ll go—“

“Stop.” Gilbert said, still not all there. “Please, just. I need a second to process this, but please don’t leave, Birdie.” Matthew thankfully sat back down and Gilbert tried to make sense of everything he just heard.

Where did he even *begin* ? There was so much to unpack from the last minute or so that he was reeling. Okay, one thing at a time.

“You’re asexual,” Gilbert said, starting with something he knew how to deal with.

Matthew looked up and grimaced. “Maybe? I guess I’m on the spectrum. I don’t really know much about it and Lovino just mentioned the term to me a couple of weeks ago. I only know how I feel about things.”

“Can you describe it to me? Please? I would like to understand.” Gilbert asked. He knew a bit about the sexuality in theory, but he wanted to know how Matthew experienced things.

“Yeah. I, um. I never really felt attracted to people. I would look at someone and know they were pretty or beautiful, but it was like looking at a work of art. Something you see but don’t touch. I really value my privacy and space and figured everyone else did, too. It felt... intrusive to think beyond the aesthetic, if that makes sense?”

“Sometimes, I would look at someone, a guy, and want to talk to them, maybe hold their hand or hang out with them or kiss them, but that was all. I didn’t understand why people in my high school collectively lost their minds around sixteen and that was fine. I was busy and didn’t actually realize until this year that I missed something.”

“What made you realize you had?” Gilbert asked, genuinely curious. He was trying to push his confusion to the side about how he *never realized his boyfriend was asexual*, but it was a trial.

“Talking to Lovi and Feli. And...meeting you.”

Gilbert jolted. “What?”

Matthew blushed and looked away. “You...you’re beautiful, Gil, you have to know that. You’re also the only person I think I’ve ever been attracted to. I knew there was something different about you when I first saw you before school started, but I wasn’t planning on ever acting on it. It was...disconcerting, what I felt for you without having ever spoken to you. Then you kept showing up places and were so awesome and brilliant and somehow interested in me? I don’t know if I’ll ever be so comfortable with sex to initiate it as often as someone normal might, but I *am* attracted to you.”

“It would be okay if you weren’t. And one thing I want to say is that you *are* normal, Matthew. There’s nothing abnormal about not feeling sexual attraction. You should never have to apologize for who you are, including your sexual orientation. You’re not weird or unnatural, you’re ace, okay?”

Matthew blinked at him and smiled a little. “Okay. I’m not quite familiar with the right words yet, but I’ll work on it. And...I want to say that I’m not just with you because I’m attracted to you. You make me feel amazing every time we’re together and I care about you, so much that I don’t really know how to process it sometimes. I think that’s part of why I was trying so hard to be what you needed. I just...want you to be happy and I wanted to be the one to make you happy.”

Gilbert felt his heart swell and break at the same time. “Oh, *Liebling* , come here.” He opened his arms and Matthew quickly crawled into his lap. Gilbert wasted no time wrapping himself around him. “Don’t you think I want the same for you? I want you as *you* , not some ideal partner. *You* , Matthew. And on the sex thing, *please* tell me if you aren’t up to it. I almost always want you, so you *need* to tell me no if you don’t want me. I won’t be offended, I promise. I won’t get mad or push or throw you out...by the way, who the *fuck* did that to you? Who do I need to kill?”

Matthew started laughing into his shoulder, not far from where he had been crying not an hour before and Gilbert was relieved at the shift in mood. He smiled and continued, “You think I’m joking!”

“I certainly hope you are!” Matthew pulled back to look him in the eye, as happy as Gilbert had ever seen him. “I’m going to be a lawyer, you know! I can’t have my boyfriend going around killing everyone who’s done me wrong.”

“Hmm, you’re right. Didn’t think that one through. How should I thank you for saving me from a life of crime?”

“Oh, I think a kiss would do.”

Gilbert obliged.

A/N: Fuck the patriarchy for making people feel like they owe their partners sex and making some people feel like they are entitled to sex with their partner whenever they want. Seriously.

Chapter title is from Troye Sivan’s “Talk Me Down.” While I understand that the song can be seen as unrequited love, I always heard it as an asexual person being in love with someone who’s not ace. The ace person was convinced that their love would never be enough for their person, so they resigned themselves to the end before it began, no matter how essential they came to view their love to their life. I saw it as a song of wanting the best for your partner and being convinced that you would never be what they needed or deserved, but being too selfish to let them go before they pulled away. *Gray areas and expectations. But I’m not the one if we’re honest, yeah. But I want to sleep next to you. And I want to come **home** to you. I want to hold hands with you. I want to be close to you.*

Title: Party Time!

A/N: Just a fun filler chapter. They get to be young college students celebrating the end of the semester. Party on!

[Outline: to celebrate the end of the semester, they rented out a karaoke room and had a blast]

After karaoke, the entire party migrated quickly to Gilbert and Ludwig’s house, wanting somewhere to really let loose. Matthew, thoroughly drunk at this point and not giving a

damn, was draped across Gilbert's lap with his head mostly resting on his shoulder. Gilbert was holding him close on the couch and he was sat in a way that let him see the entire room.

Ludwig had taken one look at him and fetched him a glass of water.

"Thanks, buddy," Matthew said with a wide smile. "You're a great friend."

"Oh, Lord help us," Lovino said from his perch on Antonio's lap. "He's drunk. How did this happen? When did this happen? Gilbert, I thought you were watching him!"

"He can make his own decisions," Gilbert said, shrugging the shoulder Matthew wasn't using.

"Yeah, what he said," Matthew echoed but was largely unbothered. He knew Lovino was just looking out for him. "I have nothing incriminating to say this time."

The room went quiet as everyone looked at him at once. "Oh?" Francis asked, sitting against the wall with his arm around Alicia. "What did you say last time?"

Ludwig sighed. "He told me that he and Gilbert were perhaps together."

"Umm," Feliciano said, tone doubtful. "That's now how I remember it."

"I was *trying* to be *diplomatic*, Feliciano."

"Ve that's fine, but my brother raised me to be messy," Feliciano replied, sassily.

Matthew looked to Lovino to deny it. He caught his look and shrugged. "I can't deny it. I'm not the best role model."

"You're a great bother, Lovi," Matthew said, forcing himself up to drink some water. "Much better than mine."

"Me condolences," Alistair muttered from where they sat next to Gilbert and Matthew on the couch.

Matthew leaned up and over to poke their arm with a playful frown. "Rude."

Alistair looked down at their arm then back to him. *Are ye serious?*

Matthew raise his eyebrows at them. *Yes, and?*

He couldn't keep a straight face at their affronted look and ended up giggling a little.

Okay, maybe he was a little far gone.

"Ridiculous," Alistair said lowly as they fought a smile.

"Oh, wow," Antonio said, looking between the two of them. "He really is gone."

"Is no one going to answer my question?" Francis said, somewhat exasperated.

“Mattie would have to answer,” Feliciano said when people looked at him.

Eyes turned to Matthew, who just rolled his as he cuddled back into Gilbert. “Not like I care anymore, but I refuse to be the only person interrogated while wasted. That’s just not fair. Truth or dare?”

“How old are we, though?” Antonio said.

Lovino turned on him. “Late teens, early twenties. Your point?”

“Nothing!” Antonio hastened to say. “Only that dares are kinda hard to think up. Maybe truth or drink?”

“Wooooow,” Feliciano said. “Lovi, how come you like Mattie more than me?”

“I don’t,” Lovino said.

“I give better hugs,” Matthew said.

Feliciano gasped and sprang to his feet. “How dare--! Those are fighting words!”

Ludwig jumped in front of him, hands out, placating. “Okay. There is no need for that.”

“Maybe some people shouldn’t drink anymore,” Alicia said soothingly, like all this was normal. “How about you answer or have a choice between a dare or taking a drink?”

“...Sure.” Feliciano said. Matthew heard Feliciano sigh heavily before he looked around Ludwig to meet his eyes. “We’re good, Mattie. I know you’re drunk. That was petty enough that I’m a little proud of you.”

“I didn’t mean to be petty but thanks...? And that makes sense, Alicia.”

“I appreciate you,” Francis said, kissing her forehead. “You’re a saint.”

“I’m a goddess and you know the offering I accept.”

“Happily given.”

“Oh, wow,” Lovino said to them, judgement clear in his tone.

The couple shot him an identical even look as Ludwig ushered Feliciano back to his seat. “Excuse you. It’s not like I’m in her lap a like a couple of people I could name.”

“Hey, don’t come for us,” Gilbert interjected. “I don’t know if Matthew could sit up straight right now.”

“Of course I could. I just like it when you hold me,” Matthew said, snuggling into him even more.

Lovino looked back to Francis as Antonio put a hand on his back. “Point taken.”

“Thank you. Now, if we are all agreed to the terms the most patient goddess Alicia has set?” There were various murmurs through the room of assent. Ludwig, Feliciano, and Lovino all left to grab drinks and people were settled in no time, Matthew and Alistair the only ones sticking to water for the game. “Well, Matthew, what incriminating thing did you say the last time you were drunk?”

Lovino took a large sip on his mixed drink as Matthew sat up and rested his weight on the sofa’s arm. “Well, we were playing a game of Fuck, Marry, Kill. I refused to do a set because I loved all three of the characters and asked Lovi to give me one with people we all knew. He told me to pick between Gil, Alistair, and Tonio. I killed Antonio, of course.” Francis started laughing and Antonio looked offended. Matthew gave the latter an incredulous look. “Oh, please. You were still being an idiot about Lovi. Why wouldn’t I want to kill you?”

“Love you, too, Mattie,” Lovino said, smirk on his face as he lounged back against Antonio.

“Anyway, I said I would marry Alistair because I had spent the most time with them at that point and they’re pretty great. Finally, I said I would fuck Gilbert because he was the only person I was attracted to enough to consider fucking in real life. Since Ludwig was unaware I knew Gilbert, it was a bit of a shock.”

“Understatement,” Ludwig said dryly as he shook his head, fond.

“Yeah, he was upset and I almost cried but we’re still friends, so it wasn’t that bad after all. Satisfied?” Matthew asked Francis, who was gaping at him.

“I suppose, but that just leaves me with more questions.”

“Too bad. Alistair?”

“Can we back up a second here?” Gilbert asked. “I want to know some definitions—”

“Not now, angel. Alistair?”

“Mattie?” They asked, eye almost sparkling with suppressed laughter.

“Have you ever been in a relationship and, if not, would you be interested in one?”

Alistair blinked at him, raised their eyebrows. “Are ye offerin’?”

“Whoa, now!” Gilbert sat up and held Matthew closer to him.

Alistair looked at Gilbert, rightly, like he had lost his mind. “Really?”

“Gil, they’re joking!” Matthew said, leaning into the contact all the same. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Ta answer yer question: no, and yes, but not right noo. I’ve got a lot goin’ on. Fair?”

Matthew nodded. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Noo, Alicia.” Alistair turned to her with a considering look on their face. “Do ye ever get tired bein’ tha’ only woman around us?”

“Yeah. Like, at least two of you are bi, but you still have boyfriends? You couldn’t have thrown me a line? No, but it doesn’t really bother me. I have my own friends who are girls and have had *girlfriends*, so it’s an interesting scene change at least. And you all are cool, mostly reasonable people. Francis could do worse.” She shrugged. “Hmm, Antonio?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it true that Matthew had to make out with Lovino in front of you before you would date him?”

Both Matthew and Lovino started choking on air. “No!” Antonio said, shooting Francis a dirty look. “What have you been telling people?”

“I only said he had to all *but* make out with him. It *did* take Lovino grinding on him in public for you to get a clue.” Lovino looked away as he took a sip, eyebrows raised in a clear expression of *he’s not wrong*. “Lovino, have you ever wanted to make out with Matthew?”

Lovino drank.

“Damn. And I said I was messy,” Feliciano muttered into his drink.

Antonio gaped at him, so Matthew said soothingly, “We have an understanding.”

Gilbert looked at him and it was loaded. “Care to share?”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. Really? Gilbert. Was I any kind of experienced when we got together?”

“Mattie...” Alistair said in a slightly wary tone as Gilbert’s face went to stone. Then it occurred to him that maybe this was a sore spot for Gilbert that they hadn’t talked about yet.

Matthew softened and laid a gentle hand on his chest. “We made an agreement within ten minutes of meeting each other that we weren’t going to hook-up while we were roommates. This was before he met Antonio and well before I met you. Okay?”

Gilbert relaxed and he had the grace to look abashed. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Someone cleared their throat as Matthew leaned forward and whispered in his ear, “I’m yours, sweetheart. We’ll talk later, okay?”

They shared a light, brief kiss as Lovino said, “Look, you don’t have to answer this question, of course, but it’s been killing me. Are you the only straight person here, Ludwig? Because literally everyone else is queer.”

“I...am not sure,” Ludwig said uncomfortably. “I honestly do not know.”

Lovino nodded and said in the kindest tone he’d used with Ludwig yet, “That’s cool, no pressure. It’s like that sometimes. Nothing weird about it.”

Everyone made agreeing noises and Ludwig actually blushed. “Thank you. Erm. Gilbert. Ludwig question.

“Gilbert answer. Feli, do you want to fuck my brother?”

Both Alicia and Lovino had been taking a sip at that moment, and both spit it out in surprise. Ludwig gaped at Gilbert, immediately saying something in German. Feliciano just shrugged and said, “Yeah.” Ludwig stopped talking and stared at him, found his expression serious. “What? Listen, I’m your friend first, but I’ll admit I’m attracted to you. You’re kinda stupidly hot and I have eyes. If you feel like experimenting with guys, I volunteer as tribute. If you never do, that won’t change the fact that I’m your friend. Ve, I’m pretty casual about these things.” He shrugged again and looked at Matthew.

He could see how much the blasé façade cost Feliciano in the second it took him to put his usual friendly smile back on his face. “Mattie, if you could pick another guy besides Gilbert to sleep with, who would it be?”

“Chris Evans. With a beard.”

Matthew felt a lot of people staring at him. Feliciano seemed to be holding back laughter. “You don’t want to think about it?”

“Nope. I know what I’m about.”

“I *respect* it,” Alicia said, nodding.

Lovino was laughing silently. “Your bottom is showing.”

Matthew looked down at his pants before he realized that wasn’t what Lovino meant. “You really want to start this with me right now, Lovi?” He blushed and shook his head, causing Antonio to look at him sideways. “Right. Gil?”

He sat up and looked at his Gilbert. He seemed pained as he met his gaze. “Yes, my lovely boyfriend?”

Matthew smiled serenely and asked, “What’s the name and address of the asshole who hurt you?” Gilbert’s jaw dropped and Alistair burst out laughing. They actually threw their head back and laughed. “I’m serious.”

“Och, I know tha’, Mattie! It makes ye me *favorite* person.”

“Why did I want you two to be friends again,” Gilbert asked himself, seeming distressed.

“Like ye could have stopped us,” Alistair snarked back. “Are ye gonna answer him or do ye want me ta?”

“Please, don’t.” Gilbert drank.

Alistair and Matthew locked eyes. *We’ll talk later.*

Matthew winked at them. *I knew I liked you for a reason.*

Alistair laughed again.

“Do you see now why a drunk Matthew is a thing to be avoided?” Lovino asked Gilbert.

“For fuck’s sake, I’m right here. And I haven’t even said anything embarrassing!”

“What would you consider embarrassing right now?” Feliciano asked, incredulous.

“My kinks.” People stared at him and Lovino face-palmed. Ludwig drained his beer. Matthew cleared his throat. “Gil, you were gonna ask someone a question?”

“I have *so many*,” Francis said lowly, looking at Matthew like he had never seen him before.

“I don’t know, Mattie. I’m suddenly distracted.” Gilbert had that one look on his face that *definitely* did not belong outside of his bedroom.

“Whoa, okay. Alistair? Could you please save me from this situation?”

“Of course, me favorite menace. Tonio!”

Antonio took on a hunted expression. “Gil, be a pal and pull yourself together.”

“Don’t ye trust me?” Alistair asked, vaguely amused.

“Yeah, but you’re also unpredictable and vicious. Gilbert?” he prompted urgently.

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” Alistair said with a shrug as Gilbert coaxed Matthew to rest against him. He did, closing his eyes in contentment.

Gilbert rubbed his back soothingly as he asked Antonio something about an old grudge. Matthew thought Antonio drank, but couldn’t say for sure.

He must have drifted off, because the next thing he remembered was Gilbert lightly squeezing his thigh as he jostled him. “Hmm?” he managed, nuzzling into Gilbert’s neck.

“Time to get ready for bed, baby.”

“Wha?” He blinked his eyes open and lifted his head. Everyone was still there, but they were standing and talking amongst themselves, the most common topic being heading home. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

[Outline: Matthew wakes up with a hangover, but Gilbert is there to take care of him.]

Title: If You Wanna Go to Heaven

A/N 2023: Oh, this is when Matthew decides he wants to have sex with Gilbert. It's... pretty cheesy and I had planned on cleaning this up later but. Well. This was the scene that made me

write the whole damn fic, so I hope you find some fun in it.

“Alistair, can you keep a secret?”

“...ye know I can.”

“Yeah but it’s for Gilbert’s birthday, you see. I wanted to surprise him with a couple of things. First, do you know if Gilbert prefers light blue or dark blue?”

“Dark blue. Mattie, why are ye—“

“You’re DJing at the party, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“Can you put in a song, about midway through the night? And warn me before it goes on.”

“Sure. Wha’ song?”

Matthew smiled slowly, eyes sparkling in delight, and told them.

Later, Gilbert asked him, “Why is Alistair telling me that you’re an adorable menace and I don’t deserve you? I mean, it’s true, but why would they say it?”

“No clue. Ask them.”

Matthew’s shirts had become untucked from his pants at some point in the evening, which was curious but Gilbert wasn’t going to question it too much. Matthew rarely let Gilbert touch most of him in public, rarely danced with him in a way that all that screamed they were together. So he didn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, followed the beat, and held Matthew close. His hands started slowly skimming down Matthew’s sides, possessive and obvious, and he felt a shudder go through him.

“ *Behave* , Gil,” he said a little breathlessly close to Gilbert’s ear.

“I am behaving, Matthew,” he answered, hands continuing to lay claim to Matthew’s body. “I haven’t tried to do body shots off of you. I haven’t told anyone how much I’ve wanted to suck you off since I saw you walk in.” Matthew gasped and Gilbert smirked, reveling in the effect he had on him.

He continued speaking with his lips just barely brushing Matthew’s ear. “I haven’t pinned you to the wall, wrapped your legs around me, and told you just how fucking beautiful you are. I haven’t bragged that I have the best boyfriend in the world, so they could see you blush then burn with jealousy that I am yours. I haven’t made you moan in front of all these people just to prove that you are *mine* . *Liebling*, I *am* behaving.”

Matthew swayed into him and Gilbert straightened his back a little so Matthew's hands around the back of his neck would encourage him closer still. Gilbert felt just how heavily Matthew was breathing from his words as his hands moved from his ribs, down his waist, and to his hips.

Matthew seemed to regain himself as he halted Gilbert's hands and held them steady at his hips. He pulled back, considering look on his face, before smiling mischievously, knowingly. That made something in Gilbert stand at attention. Matthew almost never wore that expression and Gilbert had never seen it outside of his bedroom.

He leaned towards Gilbert again and said loud enough to be heard over the music, "I love this song."

Gilbert was looking down the short distance between them and bent to kiss him. Matthew arched away from him with that smile, hips pressed against his now as his hands moving to rest on Gilbert's chest. Matthew was rarely this playful—Gilbert loved it when he was—but it almost put him on edge for him to be like this in the middle of a crowd.

After a long moment of shared breath and mindless dancing, he ventured to cup Matthew's ass when his hands were caught and held still. Matthew shook his head at him and leaned in once more to say in his ear, "Listen."

The base dropped on the song and there now was a pulsing, sensual beat to it. A woman crooned.

He says, "Ooh, baby girl, don't get cut on my edges."

Matthew slowly began moving Gilbert's hands up his body, edging under the hems of his shirts. His lips trailed a measured path down Gilbert's jaw line, mouthing the words.

I'm the king of everything. You know my tongue is a weapon.

Matthew nipped at his jaw lightly, hands pausing just at the top of Matthew's slacks.

There's a light in the crack that's separating your thighs.

Matthew's eyes met his as he positioned his mouth over Gilbert's.

And if you wanna go to heaven—"

Matthew moved Gilbert's hands to his waist where he was not met with the bare skin he expected, but soft, delicate fabric. He felt his breath as Matthew sang out loud, lips brushing his, "You should fuck me tonight."

Gilbert froze, eyes widening and body still as he processed Matthew's words and the feel of lace on the other boy's skin. Matthew held his gaze, face serious, and...he meant it. Oh, God, *he meant it*.

Too much time passed and Gilbert watched doubt crawl into Matthew's eyes. His hands moved, one to Gilbert's chest and the other to cup his face. He saw more than heard Matthew

ask, “Gil?”

His brain started working again and he felt little more than a beast as he clutched at Matthew’s waist, brought up a hand to hold the back of his head, and kissed him. He felt the initial shock of his reaction fill Matthew’s body before the boy melted against him and kissed him back.

The kiss was messy, filthy even. He knew he was using too much tongue, that he was all but fucking Matthew’s mouth with his in public. But his boyfriend just took it, moaning and rolling his hips against him as his hand curled to claw into Gilbert’s chest.

They needed to go. Right now.

He pulled back abruptly and Matthew almost seemed to stumble, shifting unsteadily as Gilbert held him close. His eyes were a little glazed over and his lips were swollen, slick and just a little darker from abuse. Gilbert kept his hand in Matthew’s hair as he said, voice dark, “We. Are. Leaving.”

He wasn’t sure if Matthew actually heard his words over the music that Gilbert barely registered, but he nodded all the same, biting his lip and flicking his eyes down to Gilbert’s mouth. It was too much and Gilbert kissed him again, hard but brief.

He pulled back but took Matthew’s hand as he stalked towards the exit. He needed to grab their coats—it was January, for fuck’s sake—but he had no patience to look for his. Gilbert almost groaned in frustration when Lovino approached them, his and Matthew’s coats in hand. “Happy birthday,” He said, eyes amused. “A car to take you back to your place is almost here.”

Gilbert frowned in confusion, mind still trying to think past *Matthew is wearing lingerie*, but the most wonderful boyfriend in the world took both coats and said, “Thanks, Lovi!”

“Thanks,” Gilbert parroted, not *really* focused but understanding that Lovino was helping him take Matthew back to his place faster. Gilbert’s gaze went back to Matthew distractedly and Lovino laughed.

“It’s a black Toyota sedan, first three letters of the plate are LKM. Have fun!” Lovino walked away and Matthew shoved his coat at him. Gilbert took it and looked away from Matthew to put it on quickly. The faster he was deemed ready, the faster they could get in the car, and the sooner he would see just what Matthew was wearing under his clothes.

Matthew was already opening the door when Gilbert got his coat zipped. They headed outside into the cold night, just in time to see their ride appearing. Gilbert shut the door as Matthew flagged down the driver. In little time, they had climbed into the back of the car. While the driver was thankfully quiet, Gilbert found himself confined in a small space with the person currently responsible for his state of near insanity.

Gilbert looked at Matthew fully, knowing that his expression displayed a lot of what was going through his head. “Five minutes, Gilbert.” He pouted at him. “No.”

Gilbert sighed but stayed on his side of the car. “Alright.” Matthew rewarded him by moving to the middle seat and taking his hand. “Not helping, *Liebling* .”

“You can handle it. You...are sober, right?”

“Extremely. Had two drinks before Scottie started taking them away. They kept shooting me this look and...they were in on this set up.”

Matthew nodded. “They were the DJ. I hadn’t exactly detailed what I wanted to surprise you with or why I needed you sober, but the song request was apparently explanation enough.”

“So this is a...birthday present?” Gilbert said, slowly, trying to understand exactly what Matthew was offering him here.

“The only special part about this is...” Matthew laid Gilbert’s palm against the top of his leg and he felt the garter strap beneath the fabric. His hand squeezed Matthew’s thigh as an involuntary reflex to the lust that seized him and he heard Matthew’s breath catch softly.

“Everything else is just us, Gil. The timing was convenient, however, so I took advantage of it.”

Gilbert hummed, his hand moving on Matthew’s leg. Touching him helped calm the urgency in his mind, gifted him with some semblance of sanity as he slowly traced the edge of what had to be a stocking. Matthew froze in his seat but didn’t stop him. So he continued the following the uneven line, utterly fascinated as Matthew’s thighs parted to let him do it unhindered. It was only when his hand met the seat and started moving upwards did Matthew grab him and say, “Oh, look, we’re here.”

The car had barely stopped moving when Gilbert opened the door, impatient as Matthew followed him, thanking their driver merrily on the way out. He marched to his front door, unlocking it and tearing his coat off before Matthew made it to the entryway. When he closed it, Gilbert kicked his shoes off and gave in to his need. He kissed him, trapping Matthew against the door.

Matthew kissed him back but was laughing all the while. “Sweetheart,” he said when Gilbert started kissing his neck as he unzipped Matthew’s coat. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to practice tomorrow morning either, so we have all night. There’s—ah—no need to r-rush.”

No need to rush, he says . “I disagree,” he said, biting that one spot that made Matthew’s knees weak. Matthew gasped and arched his neck, offering it to Gilbert. Matthew’s coat fell to the floor and Gilbert immediately started working on Matthew’s shirt, one hand absently going to lock the door.

“Wait, Gil!” Matthew was still laughing, pushing him away lightly and holding his shirt down so that Gilbert couldn’t even glimpse at what he was wearing. “You can’t undress me here!”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want Ludwig to have to *step over my clothes* when he comes home tomorrow!”

That was fair enough but that meant they needed to be moving upstairs and... Gilbert’s mind caught on one word and he stopped kissing Matthew to straighten and look him in the eye. “Tomorrow?”

Matthew looked suitably debauched as he nodded. “I *may* have suggested that finding somewhere else to sleep would be a wise idea tonight.”

Gilbert smiled slowly at Matthew and felt him shiver. “And why is that, Mattie?” He stepped away from him and Matthew stumbled forward. Gilbert caught him but started lead him further into the house.

Matthew managed to kick his coat to where Gilbert’s was on the floor but only fought his pull long enough to discard his shoes. “Because I...” Matthew’s flush deepened as he trailed and Gilbert picked up the pace.

“You...what?” Matthew matched his speed as they moved up the stairs.

“I...think I’ll be making a lot of noise.” Matthew said quietly as they started down the short hallway to his door.

“Yes, Matthew,” Gilbert said, *finally* loosening his hold on self-control. He gently pushed Matthew into his room, turned on his light, and continued in a low voice, “I am going to make you scream.”

Gilbert closed the door behind him.

Title: Take These Walls Down

A/N: Immediately following the last bit. Gilbert and Matthew's first time.

Matthew’s heart beat wildly in his chest as the door clicked closed behind Gilbert. He felt the heat high on his cheeks, nervous about a lot of things, not the least of which being his method of surprise. He worried that he might look ridiculous in the lingerie set, that it wasn’t laying right or he had picked the wrong color or style. He fretted over Gilbert’s reaction, if he would like it and think the Matthew was sexy rather than silly. He knew Gilbert had wanted to have sex with him, had been waiting for months for Matthew’s go ahead, and Matthew hoped that his expectations were something that he could meet.

To his relief, the one thing he didn’t question was his decision to be with Gilbert like this.

His lingering concerns kept him still, concentrating on not fidgeting as Gilbert stared at him and dimmed the lights. He swallowed audibly and fought a wince. The sound had Gilbert hesitating, pausing mid-step as he moved towards him, but only for a moment. His features were gentle as he gathered Matthew in his arms and kissed him softly.

“Are you sure?” he asked quietly, voice barely disturbing the air.

Matthew bloody well hoped so considering the planning he had put into this moment. Still, he knew why he asked, appreciated it, and endeavored to ease any doubts his boyfriend had. “Yes,” he whispered as he brought up a hand to lightly cup Gilbert’s cheek. “I’m nervous about some things, but not about you.”

Gilbert smiled at him brightly before the expression morphed into something filled with mischief and need. He claimed his mouth again and Matthew fell into that kiss, tried to let his worries melt beneath the searing heat and hard press of him.

Matthew was barely aware of his hands as they moved to work clumsily at undoing Gilbert’s shirt buttons. His boyfriend gave him room to work, releasing his mouth to kiss down and along his neck. “Anything I can help you with?” he asked, voice a rumble against his skin.

“You’ll think I’m being s-silly.”

“Unlikely.” Matthew’s hands were getting increasingly unsteady as Gilbert lightly tease that weak spot on his neck, almost as a warning. “Tell me.”

“What if you think I look ridiculous in—“ Matthew cut himself off with a gasp as Gilbert’s hands tightened on him, one of them possessively squeezing his ass as he pressed his erection against him, at the exact moment that he bit him.

“Impossible. You’re beautiful in anything.”

Matthew snorted but couldn’t stop the blush. “Biased.”

“Honest.” Gilbert let him go and stepped towards the bed, expression intent and focused on him. “Show me, Matthew.”

It was an order and one Matthew appreciated. It gave him the confidence to meet Gilbert’s eyes as he worked his way out of his clothes. He didn’t take his time, thinking he had teased the man enough by relaying his desire for him in a crowded party. He dropped the items to the floor, letting them pile in one place. His first movement forward was to step out of his trousers.

Gilbert sat heavily on the bed, eyes wide and jaw slack. He licked his lips as he took in the so-dark-it’s-almost-black blue lace that comprised a great deal of what Matthew wore. Matthew could almost feel his eyes slide over the garter belt around his waist with straps going down the tops of his thighs and terminating at matching lace-topped satin stockings. Underneath the straps was a lace and satin undergarment which, although made to accommodate a penis, was stretched to its limits by Matthew’s arousal. Getting the underwear off would be a physical relief as he had been at least partially hard since he put them on. For all that he had feared Gilbert’s reaction—unnecessarily if he was reading his boyfriend correctly—wearing them had made him *feel* desirable.

Lovino—because of course he had helped him actually take the time to find the set—had suggested that Matthew consider wearing the underwear over the straps so they had the

option of fucking without having to disturb the garter, but he decided to stick with the more classic look.

“Turn around,” Gilbert said, voice rough with a dangerous undercurrent.

Matthew did, though he couldn't help looking over his shoulder to gage Gilbert's reaction.

To Matthew's satisfaction, he watched Gilbert squeeze himself through his pants, unaware or uncaring that Matthew was looking.

“Come here.”

Gilbert's voice was barely intelligible and Matthew was suddenly struck by the power he had over him. He came forward, hips swaying more than usual on those few steps. Gilbert visibly tensed, hand still over himself, as he looked up to meet Matthew's eyes. “Can I—“

“Yes.” Matthew didn't need to hear the end of the statement to know he wanted to give Gilbert anything he wanted at that moment. He trusted him and that trust had been tested over and over; there was very little Matthew would deny him.

Gilbert's hands flew to Matthew's hips and in an instant he maneuvered them so that he had his mouth on Matthew's dick over the fabric of the underwear.

“ *Oh!* Oh, my God,” Matthew gasped at the sudden heat against him. His body protested the cloth all the more and he was unprepared for the need that flooded him, the hours of arousal seemingly hitting him at once. He clutched at Gilbert's hair and shoulder, looking down to see how Gilbert had bent over to do this. His knees were too unstable for the sight of Gilbert licking his length. “G-gotta sit, Gil.”

He made a noise of frustration as he pulled back, hand urging (almost throwing) Matthew to the bed. Matthew sat/fell beside him and Gilbert moved simultaneously, spreading Matthew's thighs and dropping to his knees between them. Matthew gaped at him as Gilbert stopped himself from putting his mouth on him again. Instead he stared intently at Matthew's face as his hands gripped his thighs at the top of the stockings. “You're the most beautiful person I've ever seen and that's true, no matter what you wear. *This* ”—Gilbert slid his hands up Matthew's legs, over his hips, and to the garter belt—“just makes it impossible to think about anything other than making you moan for me. Here I am, on my knees desperate to taste you, and I forgot I needed to remove something before that could happen.

“Unless...” A downright evil look entered his eyes. “Will you be mad if I rip them away to get to you?”

On one hand, he paid good money for those underwear. On the other, the thought of Gilbert ripping his clothes off was...something. A very good something. “It's your present.” Matthew answered faintly. “Do whatever you want.”

Gilbert was clearly delighted as he looked down and moved his hand along the fabric, searching for a seam. He set his hands to either side of it and pulled. Matthew made a small noise at the sound of stitching being undone and Gilbert held his gaze as he did it to the other

side. Matthew didn't need to be told to lift his hips so Gilbert could toss the ruined garment somewhere. He made a sound of relief as his erection was finally freed and it evolved into a shout when Gilbert closed his lips around him without further ado.

Gilbert moaned around him and this was going to be too much, too fast. "Gil—ah!" He needed to tell him something, not flex his thighs in an effort to push further into his mouth or run his fingers through his hair in approval. What that thing was remained elusive for at least a minute as Gilbert's *fantastic* mouth played with him.

Then he remembered.

"Please, yes—wait! No, sorry, wait, I want, need to—" he was trying to catch his breath, hold on to a thought, which was not the easiest thing to do when Gilbert was like this. Gilbert had paused at the first word and pulled off him gently at his *no*. He straightened and was looking at Matthew in a way that almost made him forget all reason.

"You want something?" he asked, voice rough but filled with a distinctly carnal satisfaction.

"Don't...don't want to come like this. W-want you inside me."

Gilbert tensed, face going blank. "What?"

Have I said the wrong thing? It was true but was that too much? "I-I want you. Fuck me? Please? I've been thinking about it a lot and—umf." Gilbert interrupted him with a kiss.

Fuck me? He had asked, voice full of uncertainty. *Fuck me?* Like Gilbert would say no. Like he hadn't fantasized about it since the day they had coffee together. Like he wasn't desperate to know what it would feel like being buried inside him when he made him scream. Like him offering himself as such, in *lingerie* no less, wasn't better than anything Gilbert could have dreamt up.

He was wearing too many clothes.

Gilbert pushed himself to his feet as he kissed Matthew, maintaining the contact even as he stood. He felt Matthew reaching for him but pulled away. His boyfriend's expression was so bereft that Gilbert almost gave in but he needed to be naked five minutes ago. It took seconds for him to finish the few buttons Matthew hadn't managed and he managed to bite out, "Get what we need, Matthew."

Foreplay, he reminded himself as Matthew shivered at the order and did as he was told. *Foreplay was necessary*. It was a difficult thought to keep in his head when the most basic part of him wanted nothing more than to claim his body over and over and over again.

But no. More than Gilbert wanted him, he wanted to make Matthew feel good in every possible way. He wasn't sure if he had the self-control to do that adequately the first time.

Well, Matthew did say they had all night.

Matthew was pulling back the covers and throwing excess pillows off the bed by the time Gilbert had stripped down entirely. He didn't hesitate to step forward and pull Matthew against him, turning his head for a kiss. Matthew melted into him before arching and deliberately rubbing himself against Gilbert. He couldn't stop himself from pressing back into him, growling into his mouth, and splaying his hands across as much skin as possible. Something at him balked at lace interrupting his access to Matthew's body.

"You want me to fuck you in your stockings, baby?" he murmured against his mouth, on hand going down to toy with a strap.

"Don't care. Do you want them on?" Matthew asked, looking up at him through his lashes. Want pulsed through Gilbert, driving him to distraction.

"No. You look amazing in them, but I don't want anything keeping me from touching you tonight."

"Hmm, okay. Can you undo the back straps?" Gilbert did and Matthew wasted little time in taking off the belt and sitting to remove the stockings

"Let me." The stockings didn't just fall without support, so Gilbert took the opportunity to use both hands to run his fingers down one leg then the other, slowly taking the fabric with him. Matthew stared at him as he did so, trembling, and Gilbert was fast approaching a breaking point of having much conscious thought about what he did. For all that he didn't see him in it for long, the lingerie had gone far in trying Gilbert's control to not just *take* all that he wanted from him. Oh, he wouldn't, *couldn't*, hurt him, but there was a difference between making love, having sex, and *fucking*. Matthew may have been a "sure thing" but it was still nice to be seduced and Gilbert wanted to make sure—particularly this first time—that sex between them would be more than a physical act. That it was—

"Um, Gil?" The second stocking was off by this point and Matthew laid bare beneath him, hands coming up to rest on Gilbert's chest.

"Mattie?" he responded, keeping his tone light and easy.

"B-before we got carried away, I wanted to see if you...if we could..." Matthew blushed and looked away and Gilbert couldn't help but be intrigued. Lord knew he had enough fantasies about this to last years, but Matthew had always kept his desires quieter. He sat back on his heels to give him room, but Matthew followed him, sitting up. Like the first time he had brought Matthew home and to his bed, Matthew's thighs were spread to accommodate him and his hands were on Gilbert's face before moving down to familiar territory.

The movement seemed to make him hesitate, so Gilbert kissed him softly for only a moment. "Yes...?" Matthew blushed hard, color flooding his face so suddenly that Gilbert raised his eyebrows to it. Clearly embarrassed, Matthew hid his face in his hands and Gilbert wondered what could possibly cause that reaction considering he already asked him to fuck him. He lightly grabbed his wrists and said, "*Liebling* ? What is it?"

"I'm sorry, I only wanted to...no, never mind. I shouldn't have—"

“Matthew.” He used the tone that was self-assured and demanding; the one that seemed to take away Matthew’s nerves. Indeed, Matthew looked up at him, met his eyes and Gilbert could read the gratitude in them. “Is it something you want? Something you’ve thought about?”

He nodded.

“I won’t laugh or get angry or judge you or do anything you don’t want. You know this, right?”

He nodded again, looking more at ease.

“Tell me, please.”

“I want you to fuck me...without a condom.”

Gilbert’s brain stopped working. He’d had this reaction when Matthew had disrobed and shown him just what had been under his clothes the entire evening. He blinked at him and thankfully didn’t do anything he promised not to do, but it would take a several seconds to be able to respond with anything resembling human speech.

(Un)fortunately, Matthew felt the need to explain that already crystal clear statement.

“I mean we both have been tested and I know it’s a lot but I want to feel you and feel you come inside me. I want to feel like I’m yours in that way, too, marked as yours. I know you haven’t been bare with anyone else, so this could be a first time for you, too, in a way. I know it’s more risky but you’re always so *careful* with me and I know you wouldn’t hurt me. And —“

The last thread of Gilbert’s self-control frayed dangerously. It was through iron will alone that it didn’t snap then and there.

“Matthew.” He didn’t know what expression was on his face, but it had Matthew quieting. “You have successfully ruined my self-control and I’m about a minute away from losing the ability of filtering my thoughts and actions. If you want something, I need you to say it. If you want me to stop something, I need you to say it, because between your lace and the fact that you fulfilled one of my more frequent fantasies of you by *asking me* to fuck you bare, I’m having a really hard time thinking. Understand?”

Matthew looked at him with wide eyes but had a smile widening across his face. “I understand. Does that mean you’ll—“

“—slide into you with nothing but lube? Feel you hot and tight around me with nothing stopping me from...yes, that’s what it means.”

Matthew pulled him down into a kiss that quickly became frantic with need. Their hands moved over each other restlessly until Matthew pointedly grabbed Gilbert’s wrist and guided his touch to his yet-unprepared entrance.

Gilbert lightly rubbed at the puckered hole, reveling in the whine Matthew released and how he had canted his hips invitingly in response. "Can't rush this part, baby," he soothed. He sought the lube that Matthew had retrieved and wasted little time in coating his fingers in the substance. Matthew didn't care to watch him do it, instead nipping at his collarbone and hands running teasing lines along his thighs. There was an unspoken acknowledgement that they were both too close to the edge to risk direct stimulation to their dicks, but they still couldn't stop touching each other.

The next time Matthew moved against Gilbert's fingers, he accepted the invitation, sliding one into him, barely. Gilbert had fingered him before, so it wasn't like the experience was foreign, but the knowledge that he would be able to give Matthew all of him rather than simply make the man come spectacularly but manually, gave the touch a novel aspect.

It was enough to make that last thread of control snap.

"I don't know if I've ever told you how beautiful you are when you take my fingers, Matthew," Gilbert said without prompting, causing Matthew to open his eyes and stare at him. His eyes were bright and sharp and he had the smallest smile on his face. He looked dangerous, like a predator that decided to play with its prey. "I bet you'll be absolutely radiant when you take my cock."

Oh, wow. Okay, they had reached that point then. And Matthew hadn't even touched him yet.

Gilbert really hadn't been kidding when he said that Matthew had pushed his control to the limit earlier. He didn't know if it was a good thing, but pleasure filled him at his words and the realization and he released a small sound in acknowledgement.

"I can't tell you how excited I am to be stretching you open to take me. I shouldn't tell you all the ways I want to take you."

"More?" he asked as after that one finger pushed in as far as possible then spent a few fraught moments rubbing at his inner walls. Gilbert obliged him with a lazy smile and Matthew continued in a strangled voice, "W-why not?"

"Don't want to overwhelm you," he said against Matthew's throat when he tilted his head back in pleasure, gasping. There kept being pauses between their statements as they distracted each other and Matthew had a difficult time remembering how words worked, especially when Gilbert began deliberately teasing his prostate.

"*God*, Gil. What do you want? From me?" He was panting, sweating, shaking, and felt alarmingly close.

Gilbert answered as he looked into Matthew's eyes from a short distance away and pushed a third finger into him for the first time. "Everything."

The burn of the stretch eased as Matthew relaxed into it, mewling into Gilbert's mouth at the feeling. He cried out when Gilbert twisted his hand and found the wherewithal to move into

the touch, knowing he would have to accommodate more than this in only moments.

That, and it felt good.

“That’s it, baby,” Gilbert approvingly when Matthew started steadily rocking into his hand. He had started kissing his way down Matthew’s body and was currently hovering over his heart. “You’re doing so well. Never wanted anyone more than I want you.”

Enough.

“C’mon, Gil, please.” Matthew gasped out, hands pulling the man up so that he could kiss him again. “I’m ready, c’mon.”

Gilbert kissed him hard at that and slowly withdrew his fingers from him. Even knowing why he did it, Matthew did nothing to stop the concerned noise of protest at suddenly being empty. Gilbert smirked against his mouth at his restlessness for a moment.

“One second,” he said before sitting up entirely. Gilbert reached for a pillow, confusing Matthew until he urged his hips up. The fact that this was *really happening* struck him as he got comfortable on it and he was happy to say he still felt no qualms in doing this right now, with Gilbert.

What did bother him was the fact he had actually done very little to contribute to proceedings.

“Wait,” he said softly, sitting up as much as he was able and reaching for the lube. “Let me —“

“*Liebling*, I don’t trust myself if you touch me right now,” he said voice kind but hands fast to snatch the bottle away.

“What are you afraid you’ll do?”

“Come before you,” he said, like it would be the worst thing in the world as he efficiently spread the fluid over himself. Matthew looked and licked his lips at the sight of his dick, flushed to a deep red with his want. “That’s not helping either.”

“I don’t want to just lay here while you do all the work, sweetheart.”

“You won’t be, trust me.” His expression must have conveyed he wasn’t convinced because Gilbert sighed and kissed him languidly. When he pulled back, Matthew was much less troubled than before. “Please, Mattie, the first time can be hard. We can change positions later but just...let me take care of you. I want to.”

Matthew looked at him a moment longer, conflicted, before laying back. Gilbert sighed and shuffled forward until Matthew felt him pressed against his entrance. He tensed in anticipation, couldn’t help it, but Gilbert didn’t push into him. Instead he leaned over Matthew and kissed him again, just as slow as before. Matthew wanted and wanted and *wanted*, but the slow pace of the kiss had him forgetting his need for a moment and relaxing beneath him.

It was then that Gilbert pressed forward and the tip of him breached Matthew. Matthew's eyes flew open and his mouth rounded in a silent *oh*. Gilbert had frozen, too, surprise and strain and pleasure in his expression as he searched Matthew's face. *Okay?* he seemed to ask.

"Yes," Matthew whispered, or tried to—his vocal cords failed in part way through. He nodded afterwards to make sure the message got across, his hands coming up to grip Gilbert's shoulders like his life depended on it.

Gilbert adjusted himself so that the hand that guided him into Matthew was beside him instead, braced against the bed. He pushed himself deeper in agonizingly slowly and it was simultaneously the best and worst thing Matthew had ever felt. He couldn't have imagined how much the intense pressure *hurt*, worse for being somewhere no one had ever touched before. He struggled to relax, knowing it would hurt less if he could, knowing this is what anal sex *was*, but it was hard.

"Mattie, look at me," Gilbert demanded and Matthew obeyed, blinking tears out of his eyes. His boyfriend was shaking and Matthew doubted he was in pain, but his expression was frantic. "Do you want me to stop, pull out, anything?"

Matthew shook his head because having Gilbert inside him didn't *just* hurt. It was intense and intimate and bordering on *too much*, but he was glad to take it, him, happy to be able to do this. He trusted that it would get better, trusted Gilbert to take care of him, and wanted to see this through. "Keep going," he bit out. "Have to adjust. Want you."

Gilbert hesitated a second longer before taking him at his word and *holy shit* it felt like he was being split open by the time their hips were pressed together. He hadn't particularly cared before this moment, but *fuck*, Gilbert was big. It hadn't seemed to matter until he felt every centimeter of him fill spaces Matthew didn't even know he had to be filled.

When their being pressed together got to be too much, in a hope that it would ease the near unbearable flight-or-flight response, Matthew said, "Move. *Please* move."

He did, though not in the way that Matthew expected. Instead of pulling back and thrusting in, Gilbert circled his hips, pressing deeper and away, but keeping Matthew mostly stuffed full of him.

Matthew's legs tightened around his hips and he wasn't quite sure if it was in approval or protest. His vocal response wasn't exactly indicative either, a wordless cry that could go either way. By degrees then suddenly all at once, the pain was replaced with an insistent, hungry ache as Gilbert moved inside him.

Gilbert must have realized something had changed, either by the way he sounded or by how his body reacted to the intrusion, because he muttered, "*Fuck yes*," before sucking a mark onto his throat.

Matthew gasped and tried to meet Gilbert's undulation with his own. It wasn't the same, only serving to disrupt the wonderful rhythm Gilbert had set. Still, it wasn't enough for him, not now, not when he started to realize how much Gilbert was holding himself back despite all his warnings about having lost it.

“More.”

At this point, Gilbert didn't need to be told twice. The only reason he had been able to go slow before was his distress at causing Matthew pain. Learning the heat and grip of Matthew's body destroyed the finesse he had wanted to bring to this encounter, so now his only goal was making Matthew orgasm before he did.

His arms were getting tired, so he pushed himself upright and made minute adjustments so he had Matthew's hips in his hands and a clear view of all of him. *Goddamn*, he was gorgeous like this, with sweat starting to bead on his skin, feverish eyes, swollen lips, and a particular kind of need apparent through every line of his body.

He tested his range of motion, dragging his dick out as much as he could stand (about halfway) before snapping his hips forward, quick and easy. Matthew's eyes immediately glazed over and he made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded encouraging. “Do that again.”

Gilbert did then didn't stop. Matthew arched under him and moaned loudly, one hand grabbing Gilbert's and the other pulling distractedly at the sheet by his head. The sight was stunning, the perfect picture of tortured pleasure, but Gilbert didn't just want his moan and writhes.

He wanted his screams and he wanted them fast because so much of his energy was going towards not spilling inside him when they had barely started. If he could, he would tell Matthew just how he looked, how good he was, what Gilbert wanted to do to him. If he had the energy, he would tell him anything he asked to know about him, unable to deny him anything with him spread out and split open like this. In that moment, Gilbert was *his* in every sense of the word, and he would have to ponder later if that ever wasn't true.

Gilbert paused and took a moment to pull further away from him, tilt his hips just so. Matthew shot him a betrayed look that clearly said, *why on earth did you stop?*

Gilbert shot another look back that said, *trust me*, before starting to thrust shallowly inside him. When he did not immediately find what he sought, Matthew moved restlessly, tried to force him deeper, “Gil, please, I need—“

His sentence ended with a startled shout as Gilbert made solid contact with his prostate.

Matthew's mouth hung open and he stared at him, eyes wide. Gilbert smiled at him slowly. “What's that you need?”

“You,” Matthew gasped out.

Gilbert stared at Matthew and *fuck it*.

He had run out of time.

“Touch yourself, baby,” Gilbert managed as he let himself stop thinking.

He maintained his current pace and placement as long as he could, reveling in the way Matthew pulsed around him when he brushed his prostate. He was barely aware of the grunts escaping him as he fought for breath, his noises nearly drowned out by Matthew's shouts and pleas for him *not to stop, never stop, oh God, harder, please!*

"Close," he said in warning, because he was only ten seconds from driving into him as fast and hard as he wanted, seeking his own pleasure.

Matthew's neck relaxed suddenly as he looked at Gilbert and he tightened every hold he had on him—hand, legs, and ass. "Yes, yes, want it, fuck me."

Gilbert leaned over him, making sure he left enough room for Matthew to continue jacking himself off and finally, *finally* let go of every safeguard he had. He fucked into him brutally, with no organized rhythm that Matthew could anticipate. He took and took and took and prayed Matthew was as close as he was.

Then, through the dark void that was his mind, a single thought emerged.

"You want me to claim you, baby? Mark you as mine?"

"*Yes!*" Matthew cried out and it was broken, filled with need. He tensed then, the way he usually did the moment before he came, body reaching for that last shred friction that would put him over.

"Then take me," Gilbert bit out before he lightly bit down where Matthew's neck met his shoulder. To his eternal gratification, that was when Matthew screamed and came, and Gilbert was helpless to not do the same.

When it was over, Matthew relaxed against the bed, chest heaving as he remembered how to breathe. He tried to stop the trembling the second he noticed it and hadn't quite managed by the time Gilbert recovered enough to start pressing short kisses against his shoulder. He shifted so he slipped out of him, a change that felt sudden and not entirely welcome.

Gilbert gently nuzzled him in comfort before lifting his head and looking at him. He searched Matthew's face for something as he moved from between his legs, blindly reaching to Matthew's hip to rub where a small ache had set in. Gilbert was worried, that was easy enough to tell, and neither of them had yet said a word.

Matthew didn't break the silence just yet. Instead, he reached for him and pulled him into a kiss. He moved his body so he could face him fully and he felt the wetness between his cheeks, on his thighs, inside him.

Maybe it made him weird, but Matthew *loved it*.

He hummed contentedly as he rubbed his thighs together and pulled away just enough to say, "I liked that."

"Me, too," he said, pulling Matthew into an embrace. "Did I hurt you?"

Matthew shook his head and felt Gilbert's entire body relax. "I'm not in pain but I...it. It aches. And it feels strange to be...empty?"

"That's normal." Gilbert rolled closer, hold on him tight but comforting. Matthew's head rested on his chest, which wasn't exactly comfortable considering the work-out that Gilbert had just completed, but he didn't try to move away. He listened as Gilbert's heart slowed, felt his breathing even out, and had to look up to make sure the man hadn't fallen asleep.

Gilbert wasn't asleep, but seemed to be staring blankly at the ceiling. Matthew frowned, emerging from the afterglow that had suffused him only seconds before. He pushed himself up and crawled the small distance to look Gilbert full in the face. He realized he never checked in with him.

"You okay?"

Gilbert's answer was to lean up and kiss him, but that wasn't answer at all. Still, Matthew hesitated before pulling away, sensing that maybe he needed this for some reason. Either that, or he was stalling for time.

Eventually, he did pull away with a gentle smile, propping himself up on an elbow to put more distance between them. "My question stands, angel."

Gilbert sighed and brought a hand up to lightly touch his face. "You'll think I'm crazy."

Matthew raised his eyebrows, incredulous, but didn't resist the urge to turn his face and nip at the gentle hand. He smirked and tried to lighten the mood Gilbert seemed to be in. "Possible but highly unlikely."

Gilbert's lips twitched but he didn't smile and he didn't immediately answer him. It occurred to Matthew that maybe he should be concerned, that the reason Gilbert didn't want to tell him was because he had done something wrong. Why else would Gilbert be this somber after they had sex the first time?

Had he done something wrong? Had Gilbert not really liked it?

That didn't make sense and he knew it, not after having experienced evidence to the contrary. But rationality had never done much to stop him from doubting himself, especially with this man.

"Gil, my mind's starting to fill in the blanks and is coming up with me doing something wrong—"

"No!" Gilbert shot upright so he was sitting, facing Matthew with a look that conveyed his utter alarm. "*Christ*, Matthew, no, that was amazing. *You* are amazing. My problem is the fact that I want you again for that exact reason."

Matthew gaped at him. "W-what? But we just—"

"Yep."

“And you’re not even—“

“Give me ten minutes.” Matthew kept staring at him, jaw hanging loose. Gilbert ran a hand through his hair with a sigh then plopped back down beside him.

Matthew recovered himself and cleared his throat. Gilbert’s jaw clinched at the sound and he was staring—glaring now, really—at the ceiling again. Matthew tentatively scooted forward and cuddled against him. He kept watch over his now blank expression and asked. “Why are you upset by that?”

“I’m not.”

“Try again.”

He huffed out a laugh and hugged him tight. Voice quiet, he confessed, “I thought a lot about being with you before. Fucking you, you fucking me, anything. For the first time I made love to you, I wanted to go slow, ease you into it, give you the best of me. But that...you were everything I hoped for and more, but I didn’t...” He shook his head. “I went at you like an animal at the end, barely managed to make you come.”

Matthew had heard enough of this. He sat up and straddled Gilbert’s waist, well aware of what he probably looked like and using that to his advantage. He felt determined and glared down at his ridiculous boyfriend. “Let me test my understanding here. You’re upset because you’re disappointed that you didn’t treat me like I was made of glass, you were overcome with desire *while having sex* with me, and the honestly mind-blowing experience was just *taking off the edge* for you because you want me that much?”

“Um...yes?” Gilbert had the grace to wince at the admission, shifting uncomfortably underneath him.

Matthew leaned over him, putting his hands to either side of Gilbert’s head, and held his gaze. “I won’t break. I don’t want to be treated like glass. I want you to want me that much, otherwise why are we even having sex? I don’t want you to force yourself to be selfless. I don’t want you to be anything other than yourself because who are is why I’m naked, on top of you, and asking you to fuck me again. Got it?”

Gilbert had lost all sheepishness from his expression, his expression one of surprise and awe, but only for a moment. His eyes sharpened and he took on an air that Matthew recognized. “Yes,” he said simply, the word barely more than a rumble. His hands heavily rested on his thighs, then began to slide upwards.

Oh . Matthew licked his lips and whispered, “What are you thinking right now?”

“How much I want to take you apart.”

Matthew’s heart skipped a beat before racing, as if to make up for the misstep. “I’m yours, Gilbert. What are you waiting for?”

Gilbert claimed his mouth and Matthew didn't need to goad him into doing anything after that.

By all rights, Gilbert should be sleeping the sleep of the exhausted. He was tired, sore, and utterly sated, yet his mind wouldn't let him rest. He owed all of these feeling to the young man sleeping beside him, curled into his heat and embrace like he was meant to be there. Matthew was completely knocked out and Gilbert didn't stop himself from moving his hair back and staring at him for a short time, trying to process what just happened.

Matthew didn't stir, even when Gilbert bent his head to press a soft kiss to his shoulder over the bite mark he had left that first time. He was well and truly out and Gilbert was grateful for that fact, wanting him close but also needing several moments to himself.

One: they had had a lot of sex. After Matthew had made it very clear that Gilbert was worrying over nothing, he had done his best to...well, it was best not to dwell on the details. Suffice to say Gilbert needed another two rounds to feel like he'd had enough for the night. That, and Matthew had told him in no uncertain terms after the slow and excruciatingly intimate third round that he was going to sleep as soon as it was feasible. After hydrating, showering, and changing the sheets, Matthew's head had barely hit the pillow before he was lost to sleep.

It had been good. *Really* good. Like probably *best sex I've ever had* good. Matthew had indulged him and Gilbert's nerves were still humming with pleasure. Still, there had been nothing more satisfying than watching Matthew discover something new, then roll with it, fall into it and have fun with it, like when...

Right.

Anyway. The concerns.

Two: Matthew had probably indulged him because it was his birthday. While he was the picture of enthusiastic consent, Gilbert couldn't help but wonder in the back of his mind if Matthew really wanted him or was just doing it because Gilbert wanted to. He hadn't outwardly acted on his concern, thinking Matthew would (maybe justifiably) get angry for Gilbert suggesting Matthew couldn't make his own decisions. That said, he couldn't ignore the fact that his boyfriend was somewhere on the ace spectrum, as exemplified by the *if you didn't want me that much why are we even having sex ?* He'd been distracted at the time, but the nuance wasn't lost on him now. It had been about if *Gilbert* had wanted *Matthew*, almost as if assuming that Matthew would never want Gilbert.

That possibility was fine on his own, nothing Matthew could help, and he probably hadn't even meant it that way. Along that vein, he could almost hear Alistair's voice in his head, telling him he was being a dumbass: *if he's auld enough fer ye ta fuck him like ye just did, he's auld enough fer ye ta respect his decisions about wha' ta do with his body*.

Gilbert sighed. That was true and he did respect his decisions. He only...never wanted to be a burden to Matthew or for him to feel like he owed Gilbert something. He cared about him too much to not worry about it.

That brought him to the issue he had been avoiding.

Three: Gilbert loved Matthew.

Gilbert was in love with Matthew.

He could not tell him this.

It wasn't like it was a big change from how he had felt the day before. He cared about him and adored a lot of things about him, accepting him wholly as himself even when Matthew couldn't do that. He saw his flaws and learned to love them, too. He had known this back in December, when he saw Matthew's off-key singing as endearing rather than irritating.

But something had shifted tonight, and he knew the exact moment when. It wasn't when he stripped down and showed him his "present," or when he had slid into him with the knowledge that he was the first person to do so, or when he had taken him apart and made him scream from pleasure, or even when they had maintained eye contact as Gilbert made love to him slowly.

Gilbert fell in love with Matthew when he climbed on top of him, told him to get over himself, and asked him to not change for him.

Like what even...?

Oh, then he asked for more sex.

Gilbert had no chance. He'd fallen hard and fast and he then channeled those feelings into fucking him. He had needed to act on the realization, because it took him barely a moment to realize that he could *not* tell Matthew this during or immediately after they had sex.

The change wasn't about that but the last thing Gilbert wanted was for Matthew to think his heart was connected to his dick. Sure, they had happened to be between rounds of sex when it happened, but it had very little to do with the sex itself. It was more about Matthew caring enough to ask after him, listen to his ill-timed concerns, and then promptly telling him he was satisfied being with Gilbert because he was simply Gilbert.

He had thought he was Matthew's before that moment; turns out he didn't even understand the meaning of the concept. He relaxed fully against the bed as he accepted the shift in his reality.

His last thought before sleep took him was *Lord have mercy on whoever tries to hurt him, because I won't.*

Title: Blame It on the Alcohol

A/N 2023: Months later. Lovino and Antonio have gotten their shit together. Matthew had just had his last hockey match. Matthew and Gilbert *still* have not told each other they love

each other. It's the end of the year, and they go to Francis' place to drink and hang out. Things escalate.

A/N: All aboard the train wreck! I am an unapologetic, self-indulgent messy bitch.

Francis looked across the circle to Alistair, mischievous glint in his eye that would have had Matthew on edge if much of anything could bother him at the moment. "You've been quiet, Alistair. I have a question for you."

Matthew lifted his head from Gilbert's shoulder to look at his friend. They were nonchalant, like Francis couldn't ask anything that could throw them through a loop, but there was an edge to them that Matthew hadn't seen before. "Yeah, what is it?"

Francis smirked and said, "If you had to pick a guy to sleep with, who would it be?"

"Fer feck's sake, Francis. I'm bi. 'If I had ta pick a guy.'" Alistair said the last mockingly before scoffing, amused and challenging...almost angry. "And just one?"

Gilbert had tensed against Matthew, so he turned to his boyfriend at the moment of quiet around in the room. He had his cup halfway to his lips, body frozen in mid-motion for a reason Matthew couldn't understand. So he didn't try to. He lightly pressed a kiss to Gilbert's jaw and turned back to Alistair as Francis seemed to gather himself. After clearing his throat, Francis answered, "Well, I certainly won't limit you."

"Matthew and Gilbert, of course." They looked to them now, first meeting Matthew's eyes and then presumably Gilbert's. "At tha same time."

There was a heavy air to the room, but Matthew wasn't concerned by it. He was too thrown by Alistair's words, though some part of him was relieved—with how they had been behaving earlier, so many other worse things could have come out of their mouth. He blinked wide eyes at them and made a humming sound of inquiry and consideration. Then he asked innocently, "You want to fuck me, Alistair?"

Alistair stared at him like what he just said was very strange indeed. In fact, they seemed almost stricken. Matthew rolled the thought of the three of them together around in his head and didn't find it off-putting in the least. He knew that his redheaded friend was extremely attractive, though he had never thought much on that fact until now. Matthew mentally shrugged as he adjusted his Kinsey rating from a six to a five. "Gilbert likes fucking me. Don't you?"

Matthew turned back to look his boyfriend in the eyes, only to see his mouth hanging open, eyes going between his best friend and his boyfriend. His question was a sincere one and when Gilbert didn't immediately answer, Matthew frowned, confused and a little terrified that Gilbert didn't actually enjoy sex with him. "Gil," Matthew sat up and forced Gilbert's gaze to stay on him with a hand on his face. He asked, voice still soft but loud in the otherwise silent space, "Do you like fucking me?"

"He does, Mattie," Alistair answered and Matthew looked back at them. They were bemused now, having recovered from whatever was bothering them not ten seconds before. "I just

broke him a wee bit, tha's all."

Matthew frowned harder. "Why'd you do that?"

They smirked and their expression became devious, but there was something broken about it, off somehow. "Because I could. And it's relatively harmless. He'll recover in a second." That sounded fair enough; just Alistair being Alistair. So Matthew half shrugged and looked back at Gilbert.

"Ho-ly fuck," Lovino's voice finally cut through the tension as Gilbert nodded, finally answering his question.

"Death..." Francis trailed off, reprimanding but mostly resigned.

Matthew paid no mind to that as he smiled, relieved, and said, "Love, do you want them to —"

"Matthew!" He startled and dropped his hand from Gilbert's face as he looked at Lovino. His friend was blushing bright red for some reason and, from Matthew's peripheral vision, everyone else looked some modicum of shocked. "You've had too much to drink." He said this like he meant something else entirely.

Matthew frowned again as he remembered the last time he drank a lot, but that was at the very beginning of the year, before the season had even started. So he asked to clarify, "Are you referring to that one time—"

"Yes! Stop. *Talking*. In fact, we're leaving." Lovino stood quickly, staggering a little at the speed.

"Wait, what?" Antonio said, snapping his eyes to Lovino then.

Matthew was even more surprised. "Right now?"

"What did you call me?" Gilbert said, voice distant for all that he was right next to Matthew.

Gilbert was staring at him, astonished. Matthew smiled at him softly, lovingly, and went to reply but Lovino all but shouted over him. "Yep! I'm pulling the best friend card. We gotta go!" Lovino swiftly made it to his side and started trying to pull him up by the collar of his shirt. Matthew went, but only because Lovino seemed truly alarmed and of course he would go if it made him feel better.

"Okay, but what about—"

"Nope! Say goodnight, you bastard."

Matthew was helpless to do anything but stumble out the room at Lovino's pull and call back dutifully, "Goodnight, everyone!" Then, just to be polite, he added, "And thanks for hosting, Francis!"

"You're welcome?" came the friendly if strained reply from his cousin.

“Fucking hell, Matthew. What are you even thinking?” Lovino groaned under his breath as they moved towards the front of Francis and Alicia’s apartment to put on their shoes and coats. There was still no sound from the other room but that didn’t seem odd to Matthew.

He tried to answer in a normal tone of voice, “That my Kinsey—“

“Shut up! Rhetorical question! For fuck’s sake, don’t *say* anything else!” Lovino threw Matthew his coat and pushed him out the door.

Matthew was going, but was really confused about something important. He asked as he opened the door, “Lovi, why was Gilbert surprised when I—“

“Matthew!”

“But I thought he—“

“God, at least let us get out of the apartment! Go, go, go!” Lovino’s urgency got through to him and Matthew quickly went into the hall. Because they were usually faster, Matthew headed towards the stairs only to have Lovino grab his arm and say, “No stairs!”

“But they’re faster.”

“Not if you fall and break your neck because you’re drunk.”

Good point. It didn’t take long for the elevator to arrive. Once they were in and moving down, Matthew asked, concerned, “What’s wrong? Why did we have to leave so quickly?”

Lovino pursed his lips at him in an expression Matthew could only describe as pitying. “Ask me that in the morning. Now, let’s get you home and as sober as possible.”

Gilbert was speechless. Utterly and completely speechless.

He stared at Alistair, *his best friend*, who very purposefully put down their red solo cup and folded their hands on their lap. Their hands had a fine tremor to them and they were trying to hide it, like they had hidden their sexuality from him.

Like Matthew had hid the fact he loved him. Or had he, considering he thought Gilbert already knew?

Alistair wanted to sleep with him. Him and Matthew.

Huh?

And Matthew seemed okay with it. All for it, even. Had he known?

Matthew loved him.

It was a lot to process. Gilbert didn’t really know where to start.

Alistair wasn't looking at him. They weren't looking at anyone until Antonio said, "You're *bi*?"

"We...should be leaving," Ludwig said, picking up on the tension in the room. That caused everyone who wasn't in Gilbert's core friend group to leave, though his brother did grip his shoulder as he passed. Gilbert didn't take his eyes off of Alistair as they waited for the room to clear, and noted how carefully they were holding themselves. His eyes dropped to their empty cup and bottle of water.

Five drinks. It had taken five drinks for them to feel comfortable enough to come out to them.

What did that say about their friendship? That Alistair hadn't trusted them, hadn't trusted *him* enough for this?

Had they trusted Matthew enough to tell him first?

But why hide this? There wasn't a person in the room who didn't identify as bi or pan at this point. There's no way they thought they wouldn't have been accepted, right?

What else hadn't they told him? What was Gilbert missing?

"Aye," they confirmed flatly.

"And you didn't tell us?" Antonio's words held all of the confusion Gilbert felt. *Why* wouldn't they tell them?

"Tonio, when have I ever said I was *only* interested in women?"

Gilbert stared at them, thinking through every voice and text conversation he could recall. The fact that Alistair only liked women was almost an inside joke at this point.

But they had never joined in, only laughed with them.

Or at them?

Or at themselves?

"Surely, you must have—"

"No, they didn't." Francis said, voice holding the anger Gilbert had not quite found his footing in and echoing Gilbert's own internal conclusion. "We always were the ones to joke that you weren't interested in men and you always just didn't respond. Genius, really."

It kinda was, except for the part where they all had that impression for a fucking *reason*.

"You told me," Gilbert said and Alistair looked at the floor. "When we were rooming together. You said you liked women."

"And I do," they mumbled, tone soft and near empty—but for a pleading element that said they knew exactly how wrong their words were. "Look, I wasn't comfortable thinkin' of

meself as bi or even remotely interested in men until the end of freshmen year. I didn't lie, I only never corrected a misconception."

Bullshit.

Bull *shit*!

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Gilbert demanded and Alistair flinched, closed their eyes. He had never seen them flinch like that, not from anything Gilbert had said, and it told him more than anything else that something was deeply wrong. "No, you look at me, dammit."

He had to see their eyes, the same eyes he had confided to and laughed with. Any measure of distance they had managed for themselves disappeared when they looked at him and Gilbert saw something in them crumble. "Gilly—"

"What else haven't you told me?" Alistair froze like a deer in headlights, suddenly terrified and that more than anything set Gilbert off. "Unfuckingbelievable."

Gilbert stood and turned for the door. He had to leave and leave now before his anger and confusion over the last twenty minutes had him saying or doing things he would regret later. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Gilbert recalled Alistair's upbringing, the fact they had had to fight and hide and be strong in the face of betrayal. He knew that they had come to America with a fuckton of baggage about how people perceived them and their gender, so at least part of their explanation made sense. But those vague acknowledgments could not override the hurt Gilbert felt as he realized his best friend, the one person he trusted above everyone but his brother, didn't trust him in return.

The sound of someone following him wasn't far behind. "Gilbert, wait—"

Gilbert whirled on them, saw the panic on their face, and realized they didn't even trust him to come back to them, didn't trust that this thing wouldn't break the years of friendship behind them. And that hurt more than anything. "Why? Are you gonna tell me what you're hiding?"

Pain flashed across their face, so visceral that worry nearly pulled Gilbert from his rage and hurt. They were shaking and looked so vulnerable and Gilbert *hated* he had done, was doing this to them. "I haven't told you a lot of things about me."

A slap would have been more welcome than that statement. "There's a list."

Alistair glanced away and Gilbert knew they were going to lie even before they said, "They weren't important—"

"Stop lying to me!" Gilbert nearly shouted and his eyes began to burn with tears because what *was* this? Why did it feel so bad?

"I'm not lyin'! I made judgement calls 'bout wha' I could tell you but—"

"I told you everything! And you were there for me through everything! How could you not trust me—"

Alistair looked back at him, utterly stricken. “I trust ye with me life—“

“But not with you!” Gilbert hated how watery his voice was, how tears slipped from his eyes, and how devastated Alistair looked. Tears formed in Alistair’s eyes and oh, God, but he had never seen them cry. They hadn’t let themselves cry in front of him until they thought they were losing him. “You’re my best friend and I don’t even know you!”

“Ye do. Better than anyone else, I swear.” Alistair reached out to him then flinched back, that deep pain flashing across their face once more. Why were they afraid to touch him? Did they think Gilbert would strike them, like their trash uncle? Why did they not think Gilbert would always accept them, no matter how angry he was? Why didn’t they *trust him*?

“Tell me one thing. One thing you’ve been keeping from me.” Gilbert demanded this, hoping Alistair would know they could refuse. They could refuse and Gilbert still would call them his best friend, that knowing Alistair needed time to tell him something was so different than them lying because they were afraid of telling him the truth.

Alistair’s eyes went wide with hurt and fear and desperation, and Gilbert wanted to take it back. But then Alistair said, barely moving their lips, “Me ma is dyin’.”

Oh, God.

“What?” Gilbert asked as he stepped forward, hands up to steady his friend because they looked like they were going to fall over and *Jesus Christ*, what did they just say?

“She’s been sick fer a while, on heart medication and the like. There’s nothing they can do at this point.” Those tears escaped their eyes finally and they wrapped their arms around themselves, like that would be the only thing that could hold them together. Maybe that hold, their self-control, *had been* the only thing holding them together. He watched as that control crumbled and every ounce of pain they had hid came to the surface. “They called today. She’s got three months, at most.”

“Oh, God, why didn’t you *say* —doesn’t matter. Come here.” He pulled them into a hug and Alistair just...collapsed. Gilbert caught them, as he always would, and together they sank to the floor, Gilbert’s back against the wall. He looked up and saw a flabbergasted and horrified Francis and Antonio standing only a few feet away, hands out as if to catch them, too.

They hadn’t known, either. No one had.

What the fuck.

“She’s dyin’, Gil, an’ I can’t stop it.” Alistair curled into themselves as much as possible, hiding even now, as they sobbed and fell apart.

Gilbert felt singularly unprepared for this moment.

[A/N: was going to add more here but. Well.]

Francis...didn’t even know where to begin.

He knew who to turn to, though.

“We need to debrief this,” he said lowly to Antonio moments after Gilbert and Alistair left.

“Y’all,” Alicia said, coming out of their bedroom with wide eyes in her hideously adorable pajamas covered with cartoon characters from the 1990s. “What the fuck?”

Francis held out a hand to her, acutely grateful for their drama-free relationship. She came to him and sat next to him on the couch, curling her legs under her and taking his hand.

“Thanks for disappearing when you did,” Antonio said to her, sitting heavily on the armchair. He looked about as confused as Francis thought. “That was rough enough when they thought it was just us.”

“Of course. I’m so sorry about their mom. I can’t imagine...” She shook her head, tied back curls bouncing with the movement.

“Their childhood was, well, not great is an understatement. But I meant everything else. We need a plan of action about how to respond with all of *that* .” Francis waved generally into the living room and back behind him, towards the foyer. “Because *that* is not going to disappear just because Alistair is going through a genuine personal crisis. Thoughts?”

They all exchanged glances, afraid to say something, before Alicia sighed and ventured, “I’ll say it. That fight between them was a textbook break-up scenario. When I say that was scarily similar to my breakup with my ex-girlfriend, I mean it.”

“Yeah, about that,” Antonio said slowly, awkwardly. “How much do you want to bet that Alistair hid their bisexuality because they’re in love with Gilbert?”

“And Matthew,” Francis said, brain connecting the dots. “Did you see how quick they were to calm him? Their reaction to his question? I can’t be the only one that’s noticed how much they smile at him.” *Particularly when they don’t smile at anyone else like that, not even Gilbert .*

“...I always thought that Gilbert and Alistair bickered like an old married couple,” Alicia admitted, squeezing Francis’ hand slightly. “Like it was flirting with plausible deniability.”

Francis and Antonio shared a long, loaded glance. How many times had they observed the exact same thing, only to dismiss it because Alistair only liked women? Then because Gilbert was with Matthew? Only...

“Mattie’s never been bothered by how close they are,” Francis observed.

“Bothered?” Antonio scoffed. “He actively participated. He and Alistair have been close almost from the start, before he and Gilbert started dating. Hell, Alistair helped get them together!”

“He did seem pretty blasé about the three of them being together,” Alicia noted. “Even Alistair was surprised by that and that’s an accomplishment.”

“Gilbert’s not the most understanding of people when it comes to Matthew, either,” Antonio said. “I bet if any other person told him to his face that they wanted to sleep with Matthew, regardless of whether he was included, he would have lost his shit. Lord knows I understand the impulse since I’m no better with Lovino, but Alistair is Gilbert’s exception, I think.”

“They were always going to be,” Francis said, remembering their first two years of college and how the two of them had a bond that had always been so inscrutable to him.

Lovino woke to the scream of, “OH MY GOD!”

Lovino, while expecting something like this to happen, still just about jumped out of his skin. He sat up, looking to Matthew immediately and oh, the look of utter horror on his friend’s face was all that Lovino needed to know. It was all in his eyes, really, as a hand covered his mouth now. Bracing himself, Lovino asked, “You remember, then?”

“Please, *please* tell me that what’s in my head is a dream. Tell me I didn’t ask my friend if they wanted to—“

Lovino sighed. “No, that happened. I think even Alistair was shocked at that one and they’re the most unflappable person I’ve ever met.”

“And Gilbert...did I ask Gilbert in front of *everyone* if he—“

“Yeah.”

Matthew paled as he swallowed and lowered his hands to grip his comforter hard. “Did I call him ‘love’?”

Aaaand that was the kicker. “Yes. And he heard it. I got you out as fast as possible, but it was too late to stop that.”

Matthew’s throat clicked as he swallowed again and he flicked tear-filled eyes to Lovino. That was extremely alarming. Lovino had never seen Matthew cry, not really. He was not good around people crying, especially if he cared about them. “Thanks,” Matthew whispered. “For getting me out. Before I did something worse. Then again, what’s worse than all but telling your boyfriend you loved him for the first time after asking his best friend if they wanted to fuck you like it was a goddamn invitation?”

Lovino winced and very consciously decided not to say that he was pretty sure everyone in the apartment heard them as they left, too. Tears started sliding down Matthew’s face. He was shaking, but he wasn’t making a sound now. He stared at the floor and made no move to wipe his tears away.

Lovino was damn near panicking at this development, so he tried to be helpful. He jumped out of bed to get a tissue and said, “To be fair, Alistair did say they might be open to a threesome between you all, so it’s not like you were just asking for the hell of it.”

Before Lovino could either hand Matthew the tissue or wipe away the tears himself, Matthew jumped up, slipped on shoes, and bolted out the door, hand over his mouth. Lovino cursed, put on his house shoes, grabbed his key, and ran after him.

Sure enough, Matthew was retching into one of the toilets. Lovino sighed and went to make sure that his hair stayed out of the way and he didn't lay down on the floor or something out of sheer exhaustion. This wasn't the first time Lovino had done this for a friend or an acquaintance, but this was the first time the person he was helping was literally sobbing between each round of gagging.

Eventually, the dry heaving and sobbing stopped. Lovino didn't have to prompt him to rinse out his mouth or generally clean himself up. Lovino fetched him stuff to brush his teeth and wash up a bit. Matthew only thanked him as he efficiently got himself together.

Lovino stayed with him, wary of another bout of sickness. Eventually Matthew asked, eyes red and staring at the running stream of water, "Is Gilbert going to break up with me?"

What the fuck? How the hell did he even reach that conclusion? "No! Why would you even think that?"

Someone else entered the bathroom, paying them little mind, but Matthew shut his mouth and shook his head. He gathered his things and they both went back to their room. Lovino pressed, "Mattie, why do you think Gilbert would break up with you?"

"Because. When you tried to get me to stop, you cut off something I was saying. I don't blame you!" Matthew said, turning to him with alarm at Lovino feeling attacked over this. Lovino felt no such thing, too preoccupied thinking back beyond his frantic thought process of stopping his drunk friend from saying more things that would embarrass him later. "It's just, what was left could have been taken as a complete thought."

Oh, *shit*. "What were you going to say?"

Matthew cringed and turned red, shy now. "I. Well. It..."

"Matthew, I just watched you be sick after a night of trying to manage your too honest mouth. Trust me when I say we're beyond this kind of hesitation."

"Yeah. Thanks again—"

"To quote you, 'It's what friends do.' Now get to the point. What the hell were you going to say and what do you think everyone else heard?"

Matthew moved about in the room, looking everywhere but Lovino as he said, "I was going to say to Gilbert, *Love*— " Matthew's breath hitched there but he pushed on "— *do you want them to fuck us?* " "

Lord have mercy, what a statement. Lovino cleared his throat and hedged, "But we all heard —"

“ *Love, do you want them, too?* ” Matthew looked at Lovino then and he saw genuine fear in his eyes. “So either everyone heard me ask if Gilbert wanted Alistair the way they seemed open to wanting us or—“

“—that you’ve wanted them both this entire time. Or, at least, were completely on board with the threesome thing.”

“Yeah. I’m...I’m kinda scared to look at my phone. I don’t know whether I’m more afraid of getting messages or that I’ve gotten none at all.”

[A/N 2023: Gilbert and Matthew finally talk. They say I love you. Gilbert explains that Alistair is going through a couple of things. They're both worried about them and they don't talk about inviting them into their relationship, but the seed is planted. The next time they see Alistair, they act like nothing happened.]

A/N: Anyway I thought of this when I was writing chapter 8 and lamenting how difficult it was to not make this an OT3. I’m such a messy bitch. I timed the conversation and it took less than a minute for that train wreck to start from Francis’ question to Lovino pulling Matthew to his feet.

There’s a deleted scene where Antonio, Francis, and Alicia debrief the evening. They were unprepared, to say the least.

Now, *finally*, we get to the Sequel.

Title: And I Want Your Revenge

Summary: Long story short: they hadn’t been joking.

Alistair feels like they have been doing the world’s longest balancing act, keeping their true thoughts and desires from the people they care the most for over the past few years. Too much honesty one night puts them into a free fall. As they stare down their last year of undergrad and the specter of adulthood, they have to try to keep everything together when their heart seemed determined to rip them apart.

Prologue: We Play Pretend (AKA, the Story Thus Far)

There’s a point where not telling the truth becomes a lie. That point is when one takes steps to ensure that the truth remains unknown.

Alistair Kirkland knew this, lived this.

In their case, it wasn’t the lie itself but the secret the lie rendered impossible that made it worth the effort.

Alistair hated lying, but they had become quite accomplished in it.

Unfortunately, they were human and incredibly fallible and so sick of monitoring their face, their voice, their fucking *thoughts* when it came to this. It was almost inevitable that they couldn't keep up the lie forever.

Still shocked the hell out of them when the inevitable happened though.

But that's the now. Let's start at the beginning of this tragedy, hmm? Bring everyone up to speed.

No, that would take too long.

And not all of their misfortunes. Maybe the only one they could face.

Just the important parts then, on this specific problem, the one lie out of thousands. Limit it to three factors, perhaps four.

One: this life as it began.

Early in their first year, before so much had happened, Alistair was getting to know their roommate, Gilbert Bielschmidt. Starting uni wasn't exactly what Alistair would call fun so much as a relief; a full breath after being strangled. Gilbert—the first person they had met who had taken their gender in stride with minimal explanation—made their situation tolerable. Classes had barely started and Alistair knew they would likely go crazy from boredom as they got their core classes out of the way but for Gilbert. He was their first true friend here and they did not take that for granted.

But there were things they hadn't been ready to face yet, things they had yet to recognize and work past. So when sexuality came up, Alistair assured Gilbert that while they had no problem with his being “bi as fuck,” they went for women.

The exclusively wasn't said, but heavily implied.

And that was how it began.

What Gilbert did not know, could not have known, was how frustrating it had been coming out to their family as agender. Their siblings got it pretty quickly; it was the adults and other kids that had been the problem. Their mum tried but never did quite get it. To everyone else in their small town, they had been known as the resident gay man. All the taunts and insults were built on the foundation that they were gay and a man, and not a thing would convince them otherwise.

So when their new friend had asked, all they could think of was ensuring that the (deliberate) misunderstanding did not follow them across the fucking ocean.

It took them the better part of that school year to become comfortable with the fact they liked masculine people, too. But by then their core friend group had grown to four, they had earned

a small bit of notoriety with them that made Alistair all too aware of the number of people they would essentially be coming out to *again* , and...one other thing.

In any case, Alistair was bi and no one but a handful of people (e.g. the guys they hooked up with) knew. They didn't try to pull anyone masc when with their friends or somewhere people might recognize them. They never corrected people when they assumed their interest in women. And, above all, they did *not* explain why they were never interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with anyone.

Two: Gilbert.

Alistair accepted they were bi by the end of freshmen year. It took another six months of denial to admit they more than fancied Gilbert; they were in love with him.

They were in love with their best friend. The foolishness of it all made them want to bang their head against a hard surface until it all dissolved away.

The one thing making it worse was that Gilbert was involved with an absolute prick.

It had never been just one thing that made Alistair hate Roderich. Sure the guy was a classist, entitled snob, but he generally behaved around people. Alistair tried not to let their jealousy color how they viewed him, but Gilbert told them what it was like in private. Roderich was constantly critical of Gilbert, noting his every perceived imperfection during one of the darkest times of their best friend's life. They saw him slowly cultivate Gilbert's dependence on him, use his popularity to gain social status, and push their friend to his limits.

Then the fucker had the nerve, the *utter gall* , to cheat on him. At Alistair's birthday party.

The asshole was lucky all Alistair had time to do was punch him before Francis and Antonio pulled them off of him, Gilbert standing by too shaken to do anything but stare blankly.

It took a long time for Gilbert to recover from that. He covered up the cracks in his confidence by embodying the role of "War" through most of their sophomore year. He drank heavily, played every party game, and enforced their forming Rules with extreme prejudice. Alistair didn't know what to do but be there to support him if he fell, make sure he slipped in enough food and water to not die of alcohol poisoning, and always, *always* watch his back. They, as well as Francis, Antonio, and Ludwig, still understood that Roderich had taken some part of Gilbert that made him confident in himself after the death of his uncle and months of manipulation.

The vengeance Alistair extracted from Roderich had been months in the making, final, and all too fucking quick.

In any case, Gilbert seemed to be recovered from the ordeal by the end of March, astonishingly coming out of it a much better person. He took the feeling of being helpless and became more contentious for it, rather than resentful and bitter. Alistair loved him all the more for how he picked himself up and put himself back together stronger with a little help.

Alistair also emerged from Gilbert's experience with the utter certainty that Gilbert could never, *ever* know they loved him. He needed a friend, someone who did not want something from him, who was just there for him with no strings attached. And they could be that; they *had* to be that. The last thing Alistair wanted was for Gilbert to look back on all their friendship and question whether Alistair was only around him out of some misplaced hope they would ever be together romantically or even sexually.

Besides, Gilbert made it very clear during those months he had abandoned the romantic playing field for a while. His decision made sense back in December, when the wound was still jagged and bleeding. But come May and the approaching anniversary of his uncle's death, Alistair, Antonio, and Francis all noticed how he would sometimes look after couples with longing in his face. Gilbert could fuck around, but he was a serial monogamist at heart. The problem was that he never looked at an individual with interest, even after Alistair believed he was well and truly over Roderich.

Then, a few days before their junior year started, someone had finally caught Gilbert's eye. The boy was blond, dressed to be unassuming, and doing his best to hide the new student on Antonio's team, meaning he was probably a freshman. Alistair didn't bother taking in more details about the young man, much more intrigued by Gilbert's unconscious response to him, and what it could possibly mean for their friend.

Alistair wanted Gilbert to be happy, so they gave little thought into maybe offering up some innocent freshman to be Gilbert's palate cleanser. What they didn't expect was Matthew Williams.

And this is where things get complicated.

Three: Matthew.

The first thing that struck Alistair as Gilbert introduced them to Matthew was how soft he was. Not physically, since he was wearing very little at the time and obviously had the honed body of an athlete, but for how inviting he was. Even though it was clear Alistair had interrupted something when they had entered the room, Matthew didn't hesitate to blink those big blue eyes at them and smile. He was sincere and not put off by how they and Gilbert spoke to each other. Positive marks in Alistair's book.

Gilbert kept prevaricating stupidly until Alistair had located that video of Matthew being righteously angry over a group of people bullying him and fucking *handling it*. Alistair had passed it on with barely a comment but quietly watched it more than once, fascinated, before deleting the video. To have the boy they met be so capable...well, Gilbert wasn't the only one attracted to controlled violence. They were just quieter about their kinks.

It wasn't until after talking with him a few days later, having encouraged him to reach out to Gilbert since they were dancing around the issue, that Alistair thought, *uh oh*.

The more they got to know each other, the more often that thought occurred, to the point that their mind was like a broken record.

Matthew coming to work with them on weekday nights in the cafeteria, despite the uncomfortable chairs, proving himself as kind, intelligent and surprisingly funny? *Uh oh* .

Matthew pinning Gilbert to the mat then getting up every time that he lost? *Uh oh* .

Matthew looking at them with wide, hopeful eyes when he asked if he was their friend? And asking after their well-being, just because he cared? Then scheming with them to get Lovino and Antonio together? *And* how he'd not balked at the uglier side of their titles, effortlessly ended that fight? *UH OH*.

The point at which they had to admit to having a real problem on their hands was when Gilbert texted him the next morning about the social consequences of the night before. Their response had been utter *rage* that anyone would put Gilbert and Matthew in that situation because *FUCK NO* .

Alistair: none of what you said is allowed. You and Mattie are mine

Never had a single text message made them panic as much as that one did. They covered it up, joked about it, avoided seeing Gilbert that day because, while that statement wasn't true, they realized they wanted it to be.

Alistair had been more careful after that but didn't stop seeing him, wanting to be his friend more than they wanted to kiss him.

They were especially careful because he was officially Gilbert's boyfriend and they were so sweet together Alistair got cavities just by being near them...which brings up the final point.

Four(ish): Gilbert and Matthew.

Nothing had made them ache with longing as much as seeing Gilbert and Matthew as a couple, perfect and so in love. They were happy together and that was all Alistair could (*should*) want at this point. So they were their friend, the holder of secrets that neither felt they could share with the other, and it was enough to keep from screaming their bitter sadness at the situation. Alistair maintained a content, teasing, sarcastic demeanor, playing their part as best as they could.

But Alistair wasn't an actor and they knew they slipped up every now and then. Teasing just a little too serious, eye contact that is toeing the line of regular and longing, almost-lingering touches when he and Gilbert would spar, glancing too many times at Matthew's face when he smiled or laughed.

Alistair wasn't a saint. They could only be locked out of heaven with a smile for so long.

These four(ish) things combined sapped energy they increasingly could not afford to lose. One of their professors was being an asshole and it kept hitting them that they only had a year left to get their shit together enough to be a real adult and their ma was *so sick* .

They were tired. So fucking tired.

All of this led to the inevitable clusterfuck.

Alistair had been drinking more than they usually dared, all too aware of how their internal filters go offline with the help of alcohol. They pushed caution aside for this night and this night only because they recognized they needed a break before they *broke*. Alistair just wanted to ignore the stress and fuckery of their life for a few hours, be numb to the ache of seeing the two people they longed for together in a small space.

So Alistair drank.

Gilbert looked at them sharply, causing Matthew to turn his eyes on them with concern, when he caught sight of Alistair refilling their cup a third time. They gave them a sardonic smile, saluted with their drink, and proceeded to drain the thing.

They made the next one stronger. It's not like they could taste the alcohol at that point anyway.

Everyone was moving to the living room to play a drinking game or something and Alistair started heading that way, moving to pass by Gilbert and Matthew like nothing was wrong.

"Wha'?' I can't relax for a night?" Alistair had said to them with a smirk to get them to *back off*.

Gilbert released Matthew and stepped in front of them. Matthew wordlessly left for the kitchen. "What's wrong, Scottie?" he asked, eyes scanning their face with clear concern. "You never have more than two drinks at a party."

He was right and Alistair wished they could hate him for that. "Wonder why tha' is."

It was a mutter, one that they *should not have said* because it raised too many questions they couldn't answer, but they were drunk and tired of watching their words and *God*, they wanted to kiss him.

They were not so far gone that they couldn't recognize the red flashing DO NOT ENTER sign in their mind at that last thought. They physically recoiled, not caring how it looked because they above all needed to be at *least* another foot away from Gilbert.

They needed to stop drinking. Right now. Wanting to be numb for a night was not worth fucking up their whole life.

"We're waiting, *mes amis*," Francis called from his living room and it was enough to remind them where they were.

"Alistair?" Matthew offered quietly and Alistair looked at him. The worry on his face made them ache, in a way only Matthew could. Their love for Gilbert left them bereft, angry. Their feelings for Matthew just made them sad. When they were together, Alistair *yearned*. He held out a water bottle. "Have some water? Please? You're scaring us."

Not fair, they thought. They had yet to deny Matthew anything and they weren't about to start now. They took the bottle, but didn't dump the mixed drink. "Thanks. Let's go, yeah?"

“Alistair—“ Gilbert said and it was never a good sign when he used their actual name.

“Nae now.” *Not ever* . They couldn’t talk about this, especially with him. For him to know that Alistair had kept something like this from him for this long—

He could never know. Alistair could survive without many things, but their relationship with Gilbert wasn’t one of them.

With everyone but Alistair paired off, the circle left enough space for three people sitting next to each other. It wasn’t unusual for the three of them to sit together but today it made Alistair grateful they still had alcohol available. They sat against the front arm of Francis’ couch, on the floor like everyone else. Gilbert and Matthew settled next to them and, just because their concern was nearly tangible, Alistair made a show of half draining the water bottle in one go. They knew their most recent drink hadn’t hit their blood stream yet, so time would tell if the water would help at all.

Their friends played truth or drink and they tried to focus on that, drinking the water and fully intending to drink when asked a question. No one did, probably thinking they knew everything about them or that they would just drink and stay silent.

Joke was on them, of course. Alistair steadily drained their fifth and final drink of the night before anyone turned to them, bottle of water long empty. It was only after they returned from emptying their bladder that Francis turned his eyes on them with teasing calculation.

Alistair sat across the circle from Francis and held his gaze as he said, “You’ve been quiet, Alistair. I have a question for you.”

They would play along. Alistair leaned their head back against the couch, regarding him carelessly. “Aye, t’is it?”

Francis smirked then casually dropped a bomb. “If you had to pick a guy, who would it be?”

There was a heartbeat of nothing, utter stillness before something in them snapped. They were so not in the mood for this. Actually, they weren’t in the mood for much of anything. In fact, why the fuck would so much of what they hid matter? They were his friends, they would get over it, yeah? Sure, maybe the whole being in love with Gilbert and (maybe) Matthew was a little much, but they were tired of hiding and tired of being afraid and so fucking *done* with being careful.

Acting like they hadn’t been hiding this secret for the better part of three years was nothing at all, they said, “Fer feck’s sake, Francis. I’m bi. ‘If I had ta pick a guy.’” Alistair said the last mockingly before scoffing. That was all they needed to-- “And just one?”

Some part of them immediately panicked.

(*Oh God.*

Oh God.

Why did I say that?

I did not want to say that.

Oh fuck.)

A large, numb, and very drunk part of them was beyond giving a fuck. Francis wanted to know? Well, fine then. It was just a stupid question, didn't mean anything.

Even with that stance taken, Alistair didn't dare look away from Francis as their friend struggled to recover. "Well I certainly won't limit you."

(Do NOT, for the love of God, answer that!)

"Matthew and Gilbert, of course." They looked from one to the other shock apparent on both of their faces. In fact, it almost looked like Gilbert's soul had been drawn out of his body. "At the same time," they finished.

(What the actual fuck? Oh, God how am I going to fix this, make them forget this—)

Matthew then did the worst possible thing.

He gave them hope in the form of not immediately dismissing them and visibly considering it.

Then he said something that would haunt them to their grave.

"You want to fuck me, Alistair?" It was a simple inquiry but nothing had ever thrown them through that much of a loop. He *had* been drinking but...Matthew was serious.

Yes , they thought wildly in the privacy of their mind. I want to fuck you. I want to make you scream and cry and beg and hold on to me like I'm the only thing keeping you together. I want to kiss you and hold you close and have you trust me to watch you fall apart. I don't just want to fuck you; I want to make love to you .

Alistair felt the shield they kept over their emotions slip a little and knew feral *want* was on their face if people knew what to look for. It was that slip that sobered them, had them getting a handle on themselves enough to salvage the situation as much as humanly possible.

"Gilbert likes fucking me, don't you?" He turned to look at Gilbert and Alistair had a flash of feeling that was guilt and lust and love and loss, because they wanted all those things with Gilbert, too.

The surrealness of the situation made it easier for them to pretend for a moment that the statement wasn't the end of their world because, Holy Mother of God, did he really just ask that?

To their utter astonishment, Matthew pressed the matter, sounding worried as he clarified, "Gil, do you like fucking me?"

Gilbert's brain appeared to be out of commission because he otherwise would have jumped to get that uncertain tone out of Matthew's voice. Alistair stepped in, plastering on their mask

and pretending like nothing weird just happened, all the while internally screaming to themselves *why the fuck did I do that!* “He does, Mattie,” they soothed. “I just broke him a wee bit, tha’s all.”

Matthew frowned at them, so serious and sincere in his drunken state. It was adorable, really. “Why’d you do that?”

Alistair’s mouth twisted into what they could best qualify as a smirk at the moment. Because saying, *I don’t know, I also did not want to be doing what I just did*, wouldn’t quite cut it, they said, “Because I could. And it’s relatively harmless.” *Yeah fucking right!* “He’ll recover in a sec.”

He’d better, because they were dying to see his reaction to this. Fuck, but Gilbert would normally blow a gasket if anyone point blank told him they wanted to fuck his boyfriend. They didn’t think the silence was a sign of better things to come.

Matthew took them at their word and turned back to Gilbert. Meanwhile, the rest of the party and witnesses to this travesty started to recover.

“Ho-ly fuck,” Lovino said, probably aware that Alistair had just bluffed their way out of that one.

“Death...” Francis said, resigned, and Alistair flinched at the name. They did not want the name, did not choose it, and hated it because it was so goddamn fitting. They had successfully destroyed every good thing they had touched throughout their life, leaving destruction in their wake because it was either *break or be broken* where they grew up. But the relationships they had formed here, with this group of people, were things they did not want to fuck up.

Looks like they managed anyway. It had only been a matter of time, really.

Anxiety curled in their gut, clawed up their throat, and Alistair threw back the alcohol that remained in their cup in a bitter attempt to erase the last 5 minutes from existence.

Gilbert nodded at Matthew (finally) and Matthew said, a breathy relief to his voice, “Love, do you want them to—“

“Matthew!” Lovino stopped him there, but the damage was done. Both Alistair and Gilbert stared at him. Lovino hustled to get Matthew out of there, probably realizing that his friend was about to do something he would regret once sober, but the damage was done.

To what? Or was it “too”?

“What did you call me?” Gilbert asked, voice faint and Alistair stared at him now because *of course* he knew that Matthew loved him. He *had* to know.

Lovino was a man on a mission, however, and kept Matthew from answering that question. That didn’t stop him from talking.

Alistair stared after them as they walked away and called out a polite farewell. Their voices carried through the apartment, especially since no one else had seen fit to fill the silence.

“Fucking hell, Matthew. What are you even thinking?”

“That my Kinsey—“

“Shut up! Rhetorical question! For fuck’s sake, don’t *say* anything else!”

“Lovi, why was Gilbert surprised when I—“

“Matthew!”

“But I thought he—“

“God, at least let us get out of the apartment! Go, go, go!”

The door closed behind them and Alistair was suddenly left to deal with the consequences of their actions.

Now would be a good time to pass out.

No such luck.

Alistair decided not to break the silence. They were on defensive and knew it.

Their hands were shaking. They hid the weakness, the sign of just how fucked up they were.

Antonio spoke first.

“You’re *bi* ?”

“We...should be leaving,” Ludwig said, probably sensing just how fraught the situation was about to become and wanting to be gone before things went further to shit. He pulled Feliciano up with him and Alicia was gracious enough to show them to the door, effectively leaving the four of them alone.

Alistair waited until the room was cleared before they answered, “Aye.”

“And you didn’t tell us?”

“Tonio, when have I ever said I was *only* interested in women?”

Antonio opened his mouth to answer. Closed it. Tried again. “Surely you must have---“

“No, they didn’t.” Francis said, voice not quite friendly. “We always were the ones to joke that you weren’t interested in men and you always just didn’t respond.” He shook his head. “Genius, really.”

“You told me,” Gilbert said and Alistair avoided meeting his eyes, not ready to confront him yet with anything, let alone everything. “When we were rooming together. You said you liked

women.”

“And I do. Look, I wasn’t comfortable thinkin’ of meself as bi or even remotely interested in men until the end of freshmen year. I didn’t lie, I only never corrected a misconception.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Gilbert demanded and Alistair flinched, closed their eyes.
“No, you look at me, dammit.”

Alistair did and it took everything they had to not lose it over the hurt look in his eyes. “Gilly —“

“What else haven’t you told me?” Alistair went very, very still, every voluntary movement of their body coming to a complete stop. “Unfuckingbelievable.”

Gilbert scrambled to get up, head towards the door. Alistair didn’t know what they would do, but they followed him. *Don’t leave. Please, don’t leave me.* “Gilbert, wait—“

“Why?” Gilbert whirled on them. “You gonna tell me what you’re hiding?”

I can’t . “I haven’t told ye a lot of things about me.”

Gilbert flinched back like he’d been slapped. “There’s a list.”

Alistair looked away. “They weren’t important—“

“Stop lying to me!”

“I’m not lyin’! I made judgement calls ‘bout wha’ I could tell ye but—“

“I told you everything! And you were there for me through everything! How could you not trust me—“

“I trust ye with me life—“

“But not with you!” Alistair felt raw and open and gaped at him because Gilbert was crying and that wasn’t good because Alistair was going to cry and *fuck it* but he couldn’t lose him, not over a little too much alcohol-fueled honesty. “You’re my best friend and I don’t even know you!”

“Ye do. Better than anyone else, I swear.” Alistair reached out to him but stopped themself before touching him, pulled their hand back. Gilbert was off limits, utterly beyond their reach, any invitation to casually touch thrown out the window.

“Tell me one thing. One thing you’ve been keeping from me.” He didn’t say it, but this was a line he was drawing, an ultimatum. *Tell me one thing or I walk away from you* .

“Me ma is dyin’.”

Anger fell away from Gilbert in a blink, concern taking its place. He stepped forward, hands raised as if to hold them up. “What?”

They felt like the worst child in the world, using their mother's impending death to distract Gilbert and most of their friends from the very valid points Gilbert brought up, but they were desperate, and going to hell anyway. "She's been sick for a while, on heart medication and that like. There's else nothing they can do now." Tears escaped from their eyes and they did nothing to stop them because it did hurt. It hurt on so many levels and they had been hurting for so long it had become white noise. But they felt every ounce of that pain they had been ignoring, everything they had bottled up, in that moment and Alistair felt their face crumble. "They called today. She has three months, at most."

"Oh, God, why didn't you *say* —doesn't matter. Come here." He pulled them into a hug and Alistair's knees just about gave in relief. Gilbert caught them.

"She's dyin', Gil, and I can't stop it." They said wetly before a sob wracked their body and *fuck* they did not want to fall apart in Francis' foyer but damn if that wasn't happening right now.

[A/N: Emotional conversation would have ensued. But. Well.]

"And Alistair?" They stiffened but looked back at Gilbert. He met their eyes unflinchingly, and for a moment they feared he would say so many things: *I know you weren't kidding*, or *we still have to talk about the threesome thing*, or *stay away from my boyfriend*. Instead, he said something almost as devastating. "You're my best friend. Everything about you is important to me."

[Alistair didn't know how to respond to that, so they did their best to act like the entire night never happened. Their misery was steady, was stable, and they understood it. And they had other things to worry about.]

Chapter 1: Two Minutes

Alistair goes back to Scotland for the summer to deal with their family. They are there when their mother dies, doing their best not to show how much being in the transphobic environment hurts them. They stay long enough for her funeral, packs what remains of their belongings, and vows to never see their family again.

[A/N: The song for this chapter was "Two Minutes" by The Amazing Devil. I highly recommend listening to it if you want the vibe.]

Outline between Summer and Halloween:

Matthew and Gilbert talk while Alistair is gone and they miss them. They're worried about them and how they seem to not be responding well to their messages. Eventually, Gilbert is the one to bring up the awkward party. He confesses with some guilt that he had fallen for Alistair back when they had been roommates, and he's still interested in them, but he didn't want to hurt Matthew or lose him. Matthew thinks about this, both from the perspective of

caring about Alistair deeply (though not sure if that translated to romance outside of noticing Alistair was like insanely beautiful), and the fact he doesn't want to lose Gilbert to Alistair. Matthew suggests they find a way to determine if Alistair would be interested in a three-way relationship between them once they return for their senior year.

Alistair comes back before anyone else suspects and takes a week or so to himself to mourn their mother and their entire family. The first person they reach out to is actually Francis, who is immediately like "buddy where have you been Gilbert and Matthew are basically frantic with worry about you." They do their best to brace themselves for their anger but Matthew and Gilbert are just? Really concerned?? And cuddly?!? It's making Alistair feel things and that scares the shit out of him.

Matthew and Gilbert basically spend two months doing their best to signal to Alistair that they would be very welcome in their relationship, but they are ignoring every sign, afraid of getting hurt and losing the people he cares about the most. Matthew and Gilbert first wanted Alistair to have room to make the decision themselves, but started suspecting that they weren't understanding the invitation. Then, Halloween.

Chapter ?: So Strange and Beautiful

"Bring them back to us, any way you have to."

"...you mean that?"

"Yeah. I'm not a fan of this in-between thing. We want us all to be together. I'm not going to be upset if you act like it, especially if that means they stand still long enough to see that we're serious about them."

Matthew stared up at him with an unreadable and searching look for a long moment before moving forward and kissing him. Gilbert held his boyfriend against him and tried to reassure him one last time that he wanted this and that he trusted him. The kiss lasted longer than Matthew usually allowed, the younger man pressing himself against him and reaching up to run his fingers through the hair at the top of Gilbert's spine.

When Matthew did pull away, he stayed pressed against Gilbert long enough to say against his lips, dark blue eyes holding his intensely, "I love you, Gilbert."

Tenderness bubbled up in his chest and Gilbert hugged him close. He said in his ear, "I love you, too, Matthew. Now go get them."

Gilbert let him go and stepped away. Matthew nodded to him once and turned to give his best friend an offer they could very well refuse. He looked for that person, someone he had loved for far too long, and prayed that their mutual weakness to the sophomore's charms would finally end their unwittingly long wait.

break

Alistair had been (discretely) watching as Matthew and Gilbert discussed something quietly, both of them agitated. They tried not to do it, tried to stop their eyes from looking them over with unearned possession and shameful lust and foolish warmth.

They had looked away when Matthew began kissing Gilbert languidly, the want and longing choking them in a way that they no longer had the energy to be pissed off about or push away. They were wonderful men, beautiful individually and together, and hating themselves for wanting them was a waste of effort.

They had so many other reasons to hate themselves; one less wouldn't matter.

Seeking a distraction, Alistair drained the shitty beer that remained in their cup and looked for a conversation partner. Francis was currently dancing with Sonia and Antonio was (unsurprisingly) having a heated discussion with Lovino that probably doubled as foreplay for their exceedingly confusing relationship.

Out of friends, they sought acquaintances and anyone who was looking their way with a certain kind of interest on their face, search covered by them throwing away their cup. Meaningless sex was getting increasingly less satisfying after spending so much time with Gilbert and Matthew together, but a distraction was a distraction.

"Hey, Alistair?" They turned to find Matthew right next to them, so intent on not looking his and Gilbert's direction that they had been unaware of his approach. Matthew smiled at them, lips dark pink and wet from his recent kiss.

They had to consciously stop themselves from fixating on that sight. "Yeah?"

"Do you want to dance with me?"

What.

They stared at him and Matthew stared back steadily, expectant. He was serious. "...Wha'?" they asked intelligently.

"I, um. I wanted to dance with you, if that's okay? I mean," he took a deep breath and held out a hand towards Alistair. "May I please have this dance?"

Alistair opened their mouth, closed it. They looked over to see if Gilbert was watching his boyfriend. Maybe he wanted to fuck with them? But, if so, why like this?

Gilbert wasn't looking at them, was speaking to one of the members of MMA club with a small smirk on his face.

"It's okay; he trusts me," Matthew continued, voice soothing but careful and Alistair's attention instinctively turned back to him. Matthew licked his lips before lowering his hand and saying, "You don't have to, of course. I just thought I would ask."

His voice was carefully devoid of disappointment that Alistair could nonetheless tell he felt as he stepped away. It wasn't a conscious decision to move after him, wider step putting them

just a little more in Matthew's space than he had been in theirs. There was a moment of inaction before Alistair reached for him.

They took his hand and the smile on Matthew's face alone made this worth whatever internal emotional backlash they would face later.

Matthew led them to where a lot of people were dancing, not looking towards Gilbert once, but Alistair couldn't help a last look in an attempt to reassure himself that they weren't ruining the relationship they cherished most in the world. Alistair did not trust himself. This felt forbidden, a taboo indulgence and they needed some kind of sign that this was allowed, okay.

Gilbert turned and met Alistair's gaze at that moment. He saw where Matthew was leading them and did little more than raise his eyebrows in reaction. Then he met Alistair's eyes again and his mouth twitched into a small smile, conveying with a gesture *Geez, Scottie, stop worrying so much. It's all fine.*

The last piece of their resistance, no, *fear* over dancing with Matthew eased and they started making their way into the midst of the crowded dancefloor. They were very much so in public. Nothing could happen between them even if Alistair wanted something to happen, right?

Alistair's senses came back online and then they mentally kicked themselves for their music choices. They were betting that Matthew didn't know this song, but they did and they couldn't help but shake their head at the bitter irony.

What was more appropriate for them to dance together than a song ostensibly about a love doomed by ill timing?

Alistair caught a few people doing double takes as they passed, but they tried to ignore them and kept their eyes on Matthew. He stopped and turned suddenly.

If Alistair hadn't been watching him, they would have collided. As it was, they startled but reflexively moved to catch him, hands settling at Matthew's waist. He had grown an inch or so in the year and change that Alistair had known him, so Matthew only had to look up a short distance to meet their eyes. The dim lighting made them seem darker than usual and Alistair barely kept himself from falling into that intent look.

"Ma—" Alistair started to say something but Matthew put his arms around the back of their neck, gaze daring, and stole their breath.

Matthew lifted his chin and said, just loud enough for Alistair to hear him, "Dance with me."

They felt helpless to do anything else, so Alistair kept their hands on his waist and began to lead them in slow dance. The Latin guitar and the physical space urged them closer as a deep voice sang appropriately morbid words that still drew them in, making this moment feel so much more intimate as they moved together.

So strange and beautiful

How you gaze upon my bones

A mistake, a tragedy

Since we missed each other by a century.

...Alistair cursed the day they first heard this song. They knew the moment Matthew understood the lyrics, watched as his eyes widened and felt his body stiffen under their hands. They looked away from him and let him go, intending to retreat and end this.

Matthew moved quickly, one hand grasping their shoulder and the other catching one of Alistair's as it fell. Alistair looked at him, surprised, and Matthew shook his head. He slowly and deliberately put Alistair's hand on his lower back, stepping further into their space. "Dance with me," he repeated, the words a little more emphatic and breathless. "Please."

They shouldn't. They knew it. Matthew knew it...what the hell was Matthew doing? Gilbert wouldn't...Gilbert knew that they were here, together.

Alistair wasn't the type of person to make a move on their best friend's significant other.

Halloween was a night for being a different person.

No.

Yes.

Just one dance. It meant nothing.

Why would Matthew ask?

Did the answer to that really matter? Gilbert was okay with this and Alistair *wanted* this, so why were they still hesitating?

Because it feels like I'm doing more than dancing with him.

Alistair searched his face as these thoughts flashed through their mind, lightning fast. It was only a few seconds after he voiced it that they gave into Matthew's request and their own desires.

Alistair did more than just put their hands on Matthew's lower back. They pulled him close and let their body move to the music. Matthew's lips parted as he adjusted, body brushing against theirs when he moved just a little too slow.

It quickly became too much for Alistair, the (unintentional?) contact, the lighting, how it felt like they were the only people in a room they knew to be crowded, how Matthew was close enough to share their breath for moments at a time...It was all too much. They hadn't lost themselves completely in the moment and had the wherewithal to take one of Matthew's hands and spin him around so that he faced away from them.

The result was not one that they would call disarming.

Matthew followed their direction easily, eagerly, and kept hold of their hand as he pressed his back to Alistair's front. They cursed internally as their mind raised every red flag it had that this was dangerous territory for their self-control. Alistair's body didn't care and they let him keep their hand, wrapped their other arm around his waist.

Alistair felt Matthew shiver, the knowledge telling them they were touching far too much. It was nearly enough to get them to back away, but then Matthew relaxed into them, moved his hips in a way that fit the music but fried Alistair's brain.

It was only when Matthew tilted his head to the side, exposing a vulnerable stretch of his neck to them, that Alistair had to say something, had to distract themselves because, Gilbert's approval or no, this situation was reaching crisis levels. And by that, they meant they were about five seconds from kissing their best friend's boyfriend in an extremely public space.

Still, they didn't have the strength to let him go. So Alistair bent their head as they danced and said in his ear, "Wha' are ye doin', Matthew?"

He lifted his head slowly and let it fall back against their shoulder. The action drew Alistair's gaze involuntarily down his front—the bob of his throat and the hard curves of his torso. Alistair shut their eyes before they went any further down, not wanting to know if their friend was as turned on by this as they were getting. They felt Matthew's breath against their jaw as he said, "Dancing."

They huffed out a short laugh. The situation really wasn't amusing, but it was either laughing or shouting why the *fuck* he was doing this to them here and now. "Try again."

Matthew straightened and let them go as he abruptly turned back around to meet Alistair's eyes. He laid his hands on their shoulders and said, "If I asked you something, would you be honest with me?"

He was close enough that Alistair heard him, but that was very close indeed. It was more natural to put their hands on his hips like this, so they did. The song swelled to its climax but they were barely moving as Alistair stared at him, wary and perplexed. It was a dangerous request, but Alistair couldn't deny Matthew this, not with that serious expression on his face.

Like they had ever been able to deny him anything.

"Aye."

Matthew licked his lips and looked away, hesitant for the first time since this bizarre exchange began and that made them wary. Before they could ask what was wrong, Matthew bunched his hands in their blouse and dragged his eyes over their face to meet theirs. "Do you want him?"

Of all the things that Alistair feared he would say, that wasn't on the list.

If felt like Matthew had punched them in the chest and it staggered them. Matthew stumbled as a result, falling against them. They both stayed upright, but were pressed against each

other in the aftermath and Alistair would only have to tilt their head down and lean forward to kiss him.

Matthew seemed to realize this, too, but didn't close the distance between them...which was a good thing because he was very thoroughly taken! By Alistair's best friend!

The best friend that they wanted more from but knew they couldn't get.

Matthew didn't close the distance, but he did bring a hand up and carefully touch Alistair's face, fingers sliding over their skin in a slow caress that only served to confuse them further. Matthew searched their face and said, "You know me, Alistair. Would I ever do anything to hurt you?"

"Not intentionally," they answered with numb lips, hands drifting down to his hips once more, planning on separating them there at the very least.

They didn't push him away.

"Would I ever do anything to hurt Gilbert?" Matthew asked, looping both his hands around their neck, silently asking them to continue the dance through this unreal conversation.

Alistair obliged him as the last vocal refrain began. "...No."

Matthew lowered his hands slowly until they settled on their shoulders once more, gaze not leaving theirs. "Please tell me. Do you want him?"

It was a direct question, one where no answer was telling. Alistair didn't know what to do here, didn't see a way to avoid this, but they had to try. "Why are ye askin' me this?"

"Because you never avoid answering something unless you care if the other person won't like the answer and I don't know what you fear saying." Alistair was gaping at him and Matthew smiled something tragic. "I know you, too, but there just some things I'm not sure about. I think you want him, for more than just sex. You want him the way he wants you."

Alistair was having an out of body experience. They stilled, finally released him out of pure shock. The song changed to something that had to be haunted and sultry because that was the theme of this playlist, but Alistair was deaf to it. They were bumped into from behind and Matthew steadied them as they were too out of it to really react. They just stared at him, trying to process what just happened, and he stared at them, clearly nervous. Then Matthew took a deep breath and maneuvered himself easily to drop one last bombshell in their ear.

"You want him the way I want you."

What.

WHAT?

Alistair flinched because it was just one thing too many for their system. Their brain rejected the input, crashed, and proceeded to reboot. Matthew pulled away from them quickly at the reaction and released Alistair like he had been burned seeing whatever was on their face at

the moment. They blinked and shook their head, trying to clear it enough to *do* something about this new information.

Matthew looked stricken and paled. He tried to back away but ran into other people dancing. He said something that looked like *I'm sorry* then began to turn away.

I'm sorry .

I'm sorry .

Matthew thought they were upset by him saying he wanted them.

Matthew was giving them space, walking away from them thinking that he was the only person out of the three of them with unrequited feelings.

This was unacceptable.

Alistair reached for him, lurching into motion but Matthew was moving too fast, was already weaving through the dancers before they made it even half a step. He wasn't just walking away from them; he was running, and running from where Gilbert had been when they started dancing.

You want him the way he wants you.

...the way he wants you.

...the way I want you.

The full gravity of the situation crashed into them and Alistair had little choice in that moment but to run after the boy who had just shaken their world at its foundations.

Matthew was reeling. That was not what he had expected to happen. Rather than being happily surprised or overcome with passion...oh, he really was a fool, wasn't he? Life wasn't a romance movie, with swelling music and startling revelations that immediately led to cathartic kisses. But wasn't that exactly what Matthew had hoped for when he finally told Alistair plainly that he and Gilbert wanted them?

No, happy was the last thing the redhead had been. First, they were merely shocked when Matthew said that Gilbert wanted them. And when Matthew said that *he* wanted them...

Tears of humiliation and hurt stung his eyes because he had read disgust in theirs. He had thought that Alistair wanted him, had felt emboldened by their longing reluctance at the start of their dance when Matthew really heard the song they had put on this playlist. But was that because they truly only wanted Gilbert and felt guilty about it? That night, so long ago now, did they only say they wanted Matthew as well as Gilbert to get his boyfriend's attention? To make the possibility more palatable to him?

Gilbert.

Matthew had failed him, had clumsily ended any possibility that Alistair would be open to an arraignment with both of them. Gilbert had trusted him to be enough of a lure and he just... wasn't.

And where did that leave him? With a boyfriend who was in love with his best friend? With a great friend who was likely in love with his boyfriend?

Matthew was in love with Gilbert. He didn't think he was quite there with Alistair, but he certainly loved the senior as a friend and found himself increasingly attracted to them over the past six months. He wanted them both to be happy.

They would make each other happy.

Could Matthew step aside? Or not protest if Gilbert still wanted to pursue a relationship with Alistair without Matthew? Could he be in bed with them both and bear Alistair only looking at Gilbert with desire? Could he really stand in their way?

Yes, yes he could and would object to any such arraignment. Matthew felt wretchedly selfish for it as he blearily made his way through the party, needing fresh air, but he admitted to himself that he could not let them be together now if Alistair didn't call him theirs and vice versa. He would constantly be vigilant of the moment Gilbert would open his eyes and realize that Matthew was no great prize, especially next to Alistair's brilliance.

Fuck fresh air; Matthew needed a bathroom to break down in.

He pushed his way through the house, seeking refuge and ended up in the kitchen, near the back door. Matthew hesitated, longing for escape but guilty about abandoning Gilbert here with no news or explanation. A couple of people glanced at him at his sudden stop, and, needing more time, Matthew sought a plastic cup to drown his sorrows in.

Water. He should drink water. Alcohol had only ever betrayed him, for all that the pleasant numbness would have been a relief at that moment. *And oh, to be numb*, he thought rather pathetically as his vision began to swim and he felt that distinctive flush that signaled he was on the verge of tears.

Matthew kept his eyes down for the most part, trying to keep it together, so he was startled when someone grabbed his arm. Matthew snapped his head up, horrified to see an upset looking Alistair through watery vision.

"Alistair—"

"Say it again," they said in a low tone, pitched so that only Matthew could hear. They moved until they stood right in front of him, eyes arresting and commanding.

Matthew swallowed nervously. "W-which part?" he asked, sounding thrown.

"Ye know which part, Mattie," they growled in a way that sent a thrill down Matthew's spine.

The bravado that had carried him through their one dance had thoroughly deserted him, so Matthew couldn't help hedging his bets. He offered cautiously, "You want him the way he

wants you, the way I-I want...”

Matthew’s voice trailed off and died and he looked away from their hard stare. His eyes caught on not a few people staring at them. He flushed and looked down to Alistair’s shoulder, the fabric of their tunic feeling distinctly non-threatening.

He saw Alistair turn their head to follow Matthew’s gaze and they let out a noise of frustration. “Come on.”

They grabbed his hand and pulled him back the way they had come. Matthew stumbled after them but put up no resistance as Alistair’s pace and expression had people all but jumping out of their way.

Confused by their reaction, Matthew lightly squeezed their hand, seeking reassurance of some kind. Alistair held his hand tighter and upped their pace, but that only convinced Matthew of their urgency. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or alarmed when it became obvious that they were leading him back to where Gilbert had been standing.

Matthew couldn’t help but feel a good portion of the room watching them as Alistair marched up to a calm Gilbert. “We need ta talk. Right noo,” Alistair said, sounding furious but not releasing Matthew’s hand, even when he stumbled to stop beside them in front of Gilbert. That was a good sign, right?

Gilbert smirked, looking down first to their hands then to Matthew. “Sure.”

Alistair released Matthew and stepped closer to Gilbert, body language more threatening than amorous. “I’m workin’ me way up ta being pretty damn pissed at ye, so I would suggest not actin’ like this is a joke.”

Um...what?

Gilbert immediately sobered and Alistair didn’t wait for him to respond, simply turned away and started striding to the stairs leading to the second floor. Matthew found himself rooted to the spot, worriedly looking between his friend and his boyfriend, trying to understand the contemplative expression on Gilbert’s face. He had to say something.

“Gil, I’m sorry. I don’t know what—“

“Don’t worry, baby; they’re not *that* mad at me,” Gilbert reassured him, touching his back lightly before urging him forward. “We should catch up, though.”

Matthew didn’t need further prompting and moved quickly after Alistair. They had made it far enough ahead that Matthew couldn’t see them anymore, so he took the stairs two at a time in an effort to close the distance between them.

The structure of the house made the upstairs branch off in two opposite directions at the top of the stairs. Matthew paused, searching, and found Alistair about halfway down the corridor to the left, arms crossed and impatience clear. He tried to not let his nerves overwhelm him as

he approached them, not understanding why Alistair was angry or why they only seemed to be angry at Gilbert.

There were a number of couples and small groups loitering in the hallway, probably in an attempt to escape the noise. Luckily, only one person seemed to identify the three of them and care enough to gape. Matthew did his best to ignore them as he realized that Alistair was standing in the doorway of a bathroom and couldn't help raising his eyebrows at them in surprise.

They gave him a deadpan look. "Ye have a better suggestion fer privacy?"

Matthew shook his head and entered the room, brushing past Alistair to do it. The bathroom was large, with twin vanities and a sunken tub, but the space would quickly shrink with three large adults in it. Matthew didn't bother trying to take in the details of the white tiled space, leaning against the counter in front of the far sink and studying Alistair, trying to understand.

Gilbert wasn't far behind him and Matthew saw Alistair's face tighten in some unpleasant emotion when his boyfriend walked in casually. How could he be so unbothered?

When Gilbert was two steps into the room and lifted a hand to Matthew's shoulder, Alistair closed the door and leaned against it, effectively trapping them in.

"I," they started then bit off, eyes blazing as they looked between Matthew and Gilbert. "Am tryin' ta figure out which of ye ta start with an' it's not easy."

"Me," Gilbert said softly, turning to face Alistair fully. "If you're angry at me, I don't want you to take it out on him."

"Like I would ever do tha' ta him," they snapped. "An' ye know wha' happens when someone tells me wha' ta do, Gilly. Back up." They moved forward, towards Matthew, causing him to straighten.

Alistair stopped in front of him and their face didn't relax per se, but something in them softened to ease Matthew's fears that they were mad at him. "Alistair, I'm s—"

"Don't apologize," they said lowly, anger gone but an intensity to them that had Matthew snapping his mouth shut. "Say it again, Mattie. What ye told me an' how ye told me tha' first time."

Held by that emerald gaze, Matthew barely felt his mouth move as he said dutifully, "You want him the way he wants you." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gilbert tense at the sentence. "You want him the way I want y-you."

He heard Gilbert curse under his breath.

"Good," Matthew's eyes widened and he took in a sharp breath at the word. For the first time that night, Alistair smiled at him wide enough to show teeth and it was predatory. "Oh, tha's lovely, but yer missin' something pretty damn important."

Alistair moved half a step forward and Matthew leaned against the counter once more, for support more than anything else. They used gentle fingers to push Matthew's chin up the fraction it had dipped when Matthew steadied himself. Their voice was soft now but with a core of steel as they ordered, "Fix it."

Matthew shook his head minutely, not understanding what he was supposed to say and feeling relatively unable to think at the moment. Their smile turned wry and they moved just a little more into Matthew's space, other hand on his waist now, as they said, "Want ta help him out, Gilly?"

"Do they feel like they're wanting *me* at the moment, Mattie?"

Oh.

Alistair was still staring at him expecting an answer, so Matthew said, "You want me the way I want you?" He didn't mean to make it a question, but he couldn't help the slight uptick of his voice at the end. It wasn't that he didn't think Alistair didn't want to sleep with him, since the logic of physical desire was what he had been relying on during the dance, but why should he have ever assumed that Alistair would want more from him?

The slight crinkling of the skin around their eyes was the only sign that they were pleased with him. "Aye, and?"

Matthew frowned a little and tried the impossible. "You want me the way that...you want him?"

"There ye go." Matthew stared at them and they shook their head before saying, "I'm goin' ta kiss ye noo."

"Yes—" The word had barely escaped when Alistair closed the distance between them. It broke the tension between them that had been building for God knew how long and Matthew couldn't help the plaintive, relieved sound from rising or how his hands clung to them as he kissed back.

Alistair broke away for half a second to take in a deep breath before kissing him more intently, deeper than before. Matthew was losing balance between how affected he was by the kiss and the counter digging into his thighs, so he used a hand to help boost himself up. In no time he found himself sitting on the counter while being kissed within an inch of his life by someone he cared for who had come to stand between his spread thighs.

After a while and yet far too soon, Alistair pulled away from him. Matthew was breathing heavily through parted lips and probably looked a mess. He could all but feel the satisfaction rolling off of them as they wiped at his lower lip with their thumb and said, "Aren't ye sweet. Let me go fer a moment."

Matthew untangled his limbs from them and remembered for the first time that Gilbert was there. His eyes flashed worriedly to him; for all that he was okay with Matthew being with Alistair in theory, seeing it in person could be different.

He needn't have worried. Gilbert was giving him that intense look that only ever appeared when they sparred or when he was planning on absolutely wrecking his ass.

Alistair turned to Gilbert and took a step forward, arms crossed again. "Do ye know why I'm angry with ye?"

Gilbert's expression faded to something a bit more contrite. That didn't mean he still didn't look pleased with the turn of events, but Matthew no longer felt like he was going to pounce on one or both of them in the next moment. "Yeah. I thought he knew, Scottie. I wouldn't have asked him to do it otherwise."

Matthew blinked, brain coming back online since they were talking about him and struggled to parse out the shorthand they spoke in. "Wha' exactly were ye hoping ta accomplish? Both of ye?" Alistair moved back to include Matthew in their line of sight, brow furrowed in concentration.

"We were hoping to force a conversation about how we feel about each other and what to do about that," Gilbert said leaning against the wall opposite of Matthew. "We've been trying to bring it up subtly but you would shrug it off or deliberately misunderstand our cues."

"Because wha' ye were hintin' at was feckin' insane," Alistair said, causing both Gilbert and Matthew to flinch.

"Why?" Matthew asked softly, not willing to let that stand. "Why is us wanting you crazy?"

"Because ye two are perfect together," Alistair said, gesturing between them like what they were saying was obvious. "Besides, wha' exactly did ye think I would do earlier? Kiss ye when ye were with Gilly, give in ta wha' I felt when it would be a betrayal ta him?"

"Alistair, I told you in every way I could that Gilbert knew I was there, that I would never hurt him or you," Matthew insisted, leaning forward now. "I thought you wanted me physically and I wasn't wrong about that. I did what I could to show you that I wanted you, too. What part of that was wrong?"

Before Alistair could respond, Gilbert said, "I didn't think you would let me close enough to you to say or do anything. I didn't know what he would do beforehand but you have about as much resistance to Mattie as I do and I trusted him to make the point."

Back up a second, Matthew thought, looking at Gilbert. "What?"

"Wha' point is tha'?" Alistair asked, sounding less angry now.

Matthew looked between the two of them and decided to let his question about *resistance to him* go, for now. Gilbert said, "We want to date you, individually and together. I've liked you for years, Alistair, but thought that you liking me was impossible. I wouldn't give up Mattie, but I want a romantic relationship with you. So does he."

Alistair had frozen, and something about their posture warned Matthew that they would be easily spooked. Matthew lightly cleared his throat, drawing their gaze, and said gently,

“We’ve talked about this, a lot, and we want you to be our partner and for us to be yours. We’re not asking for a threesome; we’re asking for a...” Matthew frowned. “What’s the triple form of couple? A triangle? Thriple?”

“Triad,” Alistair supplied, voice carefully neutral and Matthew tried not to be nervous about that.

“Yes. Y-you don’t have to decide now and if you say no then we won’t push you but—“

“Stop talking fer a second.” Matthew stopped and Alistair took a deep breath. “Yer serious.”

They nodded. Alistair was still for a moment longer before saying, “I need ta test something.”

Without further warning, they stepped forward and pulled Gilbert into a kiss.

Matthew was startled by their movement, but found himself utterly fascinated. He had never seen Gilbert kiss someone from any distance, for obvious reasons, and his mind went blank and quiet at the sight.

After a moment of stunned stillness, Gilbert fell into that kiss, his shoulders dropping as his hands moved to their back to hold them against him. All at once, it was like a dam broke and they were clutching at each other desperately, years of waiting coming to an end. Gilbert was his usual aggressive self, but Alistair responded in kind in a way that Matthew rarely did. A thrill went through Matthew as he saw their tongues meet, Gilbert maneuvering them so that Alistair was against the wall.

Rather than melting into Gilbert as Matthew did in their shoes, Alistair growled in the back of their throat and pushed Gilbert back until they reversed their positions. Gilbert grunted as his back hit the wall, but didn’t protest in the slightest, kissing them like they were vital to his existence.

Matthew...didn’t know what to feel. He didn’t know what was on his face when Alistair tore himself from Gilbert’s arms with a quiet gasp and turned immediately to look at Matthew. They stiffened then wiped at their mouth mechanically, hands trembling. “Tha’s wha’ I needed ta check. This won’t work.”

That shook Matthew out of his stupor. He flinched and frowned at Alistair, panic beginning to gather in his chest. “What? Why?”

“Because yer jealous.”

“No, I not,” he said automatically, because it was true.

“Then explain tha look on yer face. I won’t start this if it hurts ye, Matthew. I can’t.”

Matthew closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to put words to what he was feeling, if only to get them to stay. He started speaking without the time to think about what he was saying. “I’m not jealous. I’m not angry with either of you. I *want* you, I want to be yours, I want Gilbert to be yours. You two together was beautiful, and you give him something that I can’t. I can’t help but think that you’re better for him than me—“

“Matthew—“ Gilbert started, sounding distressed, but Matthew cut him off.

“No,” he said, eyes open now and glaring. They both look like Matthew had punched them in the gut but he couldn’t think about that right now. “No, I’m going to finish because like *hell* I let my issues keep me from a relationship that I want.

“And I do want this,” Matthew continued, pinning Alistair with his stare. “Even if it bites me in the ass later, *I want this*. I have piss-poor self-esteem, but that kinda comes with the package. So excuse me for being a little dumbfounded by the sight of you two kissing for the first time. If you have reservations about being with us, I at least want them to be things that are true.”

Matthew held their gaze, unflinching and willing this to work. Something in Alistair gave way and—

Someone pounded on the door. All of them turned to glare at the thing as someone tried the handle, only to find it locked. “Hey, what the fuck! If you’re fucking in there, maybe get a goddamn bedroom because some people have to, ya know, *use the bathroom*.”

That was fair. Matthew stood. Alistair turned and, from what Matthew could see in the mirror, jerked open the door with an intimidating snarl. The guy at the door clearly recognized them by the way his face paled. “Ye could have just knocked,” they said, voice cold enough to burn.

“Death! I didn’t realize...” Alistair opened the door, revealing Matthew and Gilbert. The guy looked so faint Matthew almost felt sorry for him. “Oh, God. There, um, there are other bathrooms.”

“No, no, I think we were done here,” Alistair said, somewhat terrifying smile on their face and Matthew *should not* be turned on by that. They released the door and moved with near feline grace as they brushed past the petrified frat boy. They looked over their shoulder to he and Gilbert and said, “Me answer is yes, but we need ta talk. It’s time fer a change in scenery, don’t ye think?”

Did...that just really happen?

Alistair didn’t make it two steps before they were all but knocked over by someone now clinging to him. They looked down, arms up in confusion as Matthew adjusted himself to hold Alistair in a tight hug, the smile on his mouth known only by its touch on their collarbone. Off kilter, Alistair tentatively hugged him back and Matthew responded by nuzzling into their neck. “Er, Mattie?”

“Hmm?” He released them just enough to look at them, his blue eyes seeming to sparkle with happiness and any objection Alistair might have had melted away. *Goddamn*, but he was adorable.

They ran a hand down his back and allowed a small smile to grace their lips. “Let’s move from tha middle of tha hallway, yeah?”

Matthew remembered himself then, letting them go and stepping back. He looked around, blush coming to his cheeks, and said quietly, "Sorry. We haven't talked about that yet." *What?* "We were going somewhere?"

"...Right," Alistair said slowly, knowing they were missing part of the conversation there, but that could wait. Gilbert came up to their side and they said, "As I see it, we have three options for absolute privacy."

Matthew and Gilbert exchanged a look and spoke at the same time.

"My room."

"Gilbert's room."

Alistair had no objections. For all that their room was included in their scholarship package, it would get cramped very quickly. "Fine."

Matthew nodded, seemed to hesitate as he looked at them, then turned on his heel. Alistair wondered at his emotional about-face and shot Gilbert a quizitive glance. He was also looking after Matthew with visible concern and that did not make them feel better. "Ye know wha' just happened?"

"Yeah, but you know how he is." He sighed and brushed his hand against theirs before following Matthew. Alistair did the same, easily keeping pace, and Gilbert spoke again before they could prompt him for more information. Leaning into them, he said, "He did the same with me, you know, when we first started this last year. He's not often reckless in displaying that kind of affection. Matthew's rarely reckless about anything, so he's more sensitive when he thinks he made a misstep."

Even with Gilbert's tone about as private as he could make it under the circumstances, Alistair couldn't help but think they needed to have this conversation alone. Still, things weren't quite adding up and Alistair wanted to be free of this party so they could at least hear themselves think. They shook their head and said as they moved down the stairs, "Later. Did you two walk here?"

Gilbert simply nodded, eyes surveying the room. The party had gotten a little more bacchanal since they had gone upstairs, causing a small smile to grace their lips. Once they reached the ground floor, Alistair turned to Gilbert and had to shout, "Find him and meet me outside! 5 minutes!"

Gilbert nodded again and they separated. Alistair went off to shut shit down for the night on their end. One thing about being who they were publicly was that they were the only Horseman that people thought they always knew if they were still around as they took their quality music choices with them when they left. Tonight, however, Alistair wanted to leave with as little notice as possible, setting up a couple of dark, rave-like songs on the computer's hardware to continue playing once they had removed their USB.

It took about a minute and not many thought much of the change in music, far too gone into the chaotic atmosphere that Alistair liked cultivating. Still, knowing that the party was likely

going to come to a sudden halt in about 20 minutes if the cops weren't called first, Alistair thought to send out a warning to Francis and Antonio. The end of the night was always most prone to people stepping over the lines that they had drawn.

D: W and I are out. Put on a small set, but ETA 20 MAX

That done, the only thing left on their mind were the two men waiting for them. If Alistair was being honest, they were waiting for either of them to renege on their offer at any point, no matter how contrary that would be to what they had learned in the last ten minutes.

Matthew and Gilbert both wanted them and were okay with the mutual knowledge.

Matthew and Gilbert had talked about dating them. Extensively.

Matthew was deliciously pliable, enticingly open and needy. Every one of the possessive and protective urges they had suppressed when it came to him came roaring back the moment they saw him weaken at the slightest hint of praise. He was their balance.

Gilbert was wonderfully challenging, an endless fight neither of them cared to win. He was the unstoppable force to their immovable object, their mirror and best friend. He was their counterpart.

The couple needed to be absolutely certain they wanted this before anything more happened between them because, once Alistair started down this path where they could be with them both, they would be unable to go back to the status quo. This change in their relationships would be an irrevocable one and they needed to understand that before Alistair ceased being cautious and trusted themselves with them.

As Alistair approached the front door, the vibration of their phone called their attention.

F: thanks for the warning

P: on both things

Alistair considered that suspiciously, then decided they didn't want to ask for clarification.

They hesitated at the threshold of the open door before spotting the erstwhile recipients of their affection. Gilbert was talking to Matthew lowly, expression gentle but careful, worried even. Matthew surprisingly stood with his arms crossed tight enough to make the muscles of his forearms prominent against his skin, eyes glaring to Gilbert's far side and mouth pinched in agitation.

Not a good sign.

Neither of them noticed Alistair's approach for a few moments and they got close enough to hear Matthew bite out, "Do you really want to push this right now? I for one am worried about other things."

Gilbert's jaw clinched, struggle to remain calm clear. "I'm capable of—" He cut himself off as he caught sight of Alistair. Matthew immediately looked up at Gilbert's sudden stop and

turned to face Alistair, tension draining from him as his arms fell to his sides.

None of them said anything for a moment, so Alistair raised their eyebrows. Time to see how much they meant about them being equal in a relationship. “Problem?”

“No.”

“Yes.” They glared at each other for a moment, Matthew’s more heated than Gilbert’s. “I was just expressing my concern—“

“Unnecessarily,” Matthew interjected.

“—about what Matthew said earlier.”

Okay, that was fair enough. “He has a point, Mattie.”

Matthew’s eyes hardened but he took a deep breath and said, “Fine. It’s a problem but can it *please* be let go for tonight? It’s an issue; I’m dealing with it. Can we move on? Start walking at least?”

Alistair and Gilbert exchanged the briefest of glances before Alistair said, “Sure.”

Matthew sighed out, “Thank you.” Then he started walking in the direction of Gilbert’s house without hesitation.

Alistair and Gilbert followed easily, but Matthew’s shoulders remained tight and he was clearly still upset. They looked to their friend (boyfriend? Partner? Labels weren’t important at that second.), trying to get a read on the situation. Gilbert was looking at Matthew with lingering concern but also some bemusement.

They continued for half a block like this until Gilbert jogged forward and took Matthew’s hand. He used it to pull Matthew into his side and kiss his temple. Matthew huffed and muttered, “Yeah, I know.”

Alistair wanted that, the ability to just go up to him and touch him affectionately. They were two steps behind them, the sidewalk only wide enough to fit two people standing abreast, and Alistair doubted once more that this was the right decision. What Matthew and Gilbert offered was too good to be true and this was just one manifestation—

Matthew looked over his shoulder at them and paused. Still holding Gilbert’s hand, he half turned and smiled shyly at them. “Um,” he started hesitantly, “I know we haven’t talked about it yet, but can I hold your hand?”

Yes . “There’s, er. No room on tha sidewalk fer me. We haven’t talked about wha’?”

Matthew looked crestfallen, but Gilbert released him and rolled his eyes. “Fuck the sidewalk, Scottie,” he said, not unkindly. “And about whether you’re comfortable with PDA. With both of us.”

Oh. That was a question. If they were serious about this, then there was no way Alistair wanted to hide their relationship. If. The possibility seemed ever more remote every moment that passed since they had left that bathroom and they remembered what neither of them knew about them. Until Alistair was certain, they would rather not get a taste of the casual intimacy they craved with them.

“I’m not opposed,” they said quietly, their palms itching to reach out to them. “I think I need ta be clear on a few things before, though.”

“Like what?” Matthew asked, drifting closer to them. He was still disappointed, but the tone wasn’t accusatory, just concerned and a bit confused.

They couldn’t help laughing a little under their breath. “About how this works, Mattie. We can’t just say we’re together without talkin’ through wha’ tha’ means.”

“I thought we did? And why not?” Matthew said before stiffening and taking a half-step back towards Gilbert. “Sorry. I don’t want to push you. We can talk more at Gilbert’s. Just...could you maybe be closer? if you wanted.”

Matthew was flustered by the time he stopped talking, eyes down as a blush graced his cheeks. Alistair looked at him and the expression *felt* sappy, restrained affection threatening to spill out. They looked beyond him, finding Gilbert’s expression troubled as he looked between them. That gave them a clue.

This was important to Matthew. While the couple had never been very demonstrative, there was never a question that they were romantically involved in public to anyone who looked at them longer than a moment, standing in each other’s space or innocuously touching, easily affectionate. Perhaps Matthew was more insecure than he had suggested earlier.

Then they remembered that disastrous party in the spring, Matthew seriously concerned that Gilbert didn’t like sleeping with him enough to ask for confirmation in front of their friends. And that had only been with the help of a large amount of alcohol. He probably would have just worried silently for days over it without saying anything, blaming himself.

Right. So, *really* insecure.

Alistair sighed and stepped forward, heart leaping as they embraced him briefly. Matthew froze in their arms and Alistair pressed a kiss to his forehead before backing off. “I’ll explain soon,” they said, looking between them. “But it’s nothin’ ta do wit either of ye.”

“Okay.” At least some of the tension flowed out of Matthew. He stepped back from them and gave them a tentative smile. They would do much to make that happiness just a little more sure, but couldn’t put their emotional and mental health on the line like that before they were absolutely certain this was real. Already they felt the wall that allowed them such control around them begin to crack and they feared that if they started holding Matthew’s hand or giving Gilbert casual, affectionate touches, they would never stop.

Alistair lightly pushed Matthew forward and looked to meet Gilbert’s eyes once more, pleased to see that he had relaxed as well. Oh, they had so very much to say, to explain.

If they still wanted Alistair afterwards, they would trust this.

The moment of truth had finally come and Alistair could only hope it would be a beginning, and not an end.

BREAK

The walk to Gilbert's house was blessedly brief, the tension in the air anxious. Matthew was a bundle of nerves and Alistair didn't seem much better. No, the redhead outwardly appeared steady until they looked too long at either one of them. Underneath the cool, cracking mask, they looked at Matthew and even Gilbert with such desperate want and fear that Gilbert didn't push them to start talking as they moved through the neighborhood. He had learned from that mistake. When they had hugged Matthew to reassure him, they seemed almost in pain, but there was a calm acceptance to it.

Gilbert had known that wanting both he and Matthew had likely been difficult for them, particularly on top of all the other stressors in their life. It wasn't until that moment that Gilbert suspected that he actually had no clue all that they had suffered over this.

It didn't look like Ludwig had returned from the horror movie marathon, so they were finally truly alone. Gilbert cleared his throat and said, "West isn't here. We could talk in the living room if you prefer, Scottie."

Alistair closed the front door behind them and shrugged with nonchalance Gilbert didn't buy for a second. "Sure."

Gilbert frowned at them but didn't push, leaving his coat and shoes at the door before striding over to and sitting heavily on his couch. Matthew wasn't far behind him, face pinched with his internal fretting, and he opted to take the arm chair. Alistair paused before choosing the other end of the sofa, leg folding up to be tucked beneath them as they turned to face them both.

There was a long moment of quiet as Gilbert looked at Alistair, waiting them to begin since they seemed to have concerns to be addressed. Matthew refrained from breaking the silence as Alistair looked between both of them for a long moment before he blurted, "Did you change your mind?"

Gilbert looked at his boyfriend then, saw him attempting to hide his worries but failing. Gilbert opened his mouth but Alistair surprised him by saying steadily, "No, Mattie. I haven't, but you might."

Gilbert whipped his head around to stare at them, understanding flashing through him. Oh God, they thought that he and Matthew would *change their minds*? At the drop a hat? "Why do you say that?" he asked, astonished and proud that he didn't just shout it in disbelief.

Alistair took a deep breath, hand involuntarily clenching where it rested on their leg. "Because I don't know how yer gonna react ta what I tell ye. I have...don't interrupt me, please. This may take a while ta get out.

“I can’t explain ta either of ye fully just how much I’ve had ta control meself ‘round ye, ta hide tha fact tha’ I liked ye, wanted ta be more than friends. I’ve done it fer so long an’ I’m honestly exhausted. If I stop keeping meself from...treating ye how I want ta, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able ta go back ta how things were. I need ta know yer serious, tha’ ye know this will be a permanent change in our relationship, before we start anything. And ta do tha’, ye need ta know a few things.”

Alistair licked their lips and looked Gilbert dead in the eyes. “I didn’t mention I was bi fer so long because I didn’t want ye, specifically, ta know. If I couldn’t tell me best friend, I didn’t want ta tell anyone. Then it was just a matter of pretendin’.”

Gilbert stared and stared and stared. What the fuck? What the *fuck* ? He started shaking his head slowly and rose to his feet, looking away from them to pace. Dear God, but they had stayed in the closet *because* of him?! They put themself through years of hiding for him?! *Why* would they--?

“Gil—“ they started, voice breaking. Alistair cleared their throat, but their words were thick with restrained emotion as they said. “I did it because I was terrified of wha’ ye would do if ye knew I was in love wit ye.”

Gilbert froze. Absolutely everything in him that could froze, before he turned around slowly to meet Alistair’s gaze. He immediately took a step forward, near staggering at the fragile expression they wore, their control fracturing before his eyes.

Matthew was silent for a long moment before saying calmly, “Gilbert, sit down.”

Alistair shot Matthew a grateful, if complicated glance before looking away from them both for a moment. Gilbert realized his mistake; he never should have turned away from them. That thought was clear in the haze of his mind. Shock. He was in shock.

They resumed speaking once Gilbert had taken his previous spot, each word serving to build their walls back up, brick by brick. It killed something in Gilbert that they thought they had to do that, had to hide from him still, but he didn’t dare interrupt them. “I’d never had a friend like ye before an’ I couldn’t lose that. I hoped tha’ it was just a fleeting crush fer tha longest but yer... *you* , so tha’ didn’t work out. Then Fritz died an’ ye needed a friend more than ye needed a lover. Then ye met Roderich and—“

Alistair’s face tightened in rage before smoothing out again. “He was a prick but wha’ he dared do ta ye...I might’ve killed ‘em tha’ day if Francis hadn’t held me back. It hit me later tha’ I was of better use ta ye by yer side than in prison over tha’ fucker. After him, ye were so disinterested in anything remotely romantic or sexual wit *anyone* an’ I worried. We all worried ‘bout ye. I wanted ye ta recover, be happy, an’ had accepted tha fact that I wasn’t going ta ever be tha’ fer ye.

“Then last year started, an’ tha first person ye looked at with any interest in *so* long was a certain blond freshman.” Alistair’s eyes slid to Matthew then to hold his gaze. Gilbert didn’t look away from them as their face softened and they smiled, just a little. “Turns out he was more than I ever expected him ta be.”

It was only with that statement that Gilbert felt his eyes begin to burn with tears.

“I knew tha first time I met ye that he would want ye,” they told Matthew. “Tha second time, I knew he would want ta keep ye. So I pushed ye two together, never stopping ta think tha’ I would want ye, too.

“I only realized wha’ had happened, where I stood the morning after ye became official. I sent Gilbert a text message sayin’ tha’ ye both were mine.” They smiled humorlessly, a dark emotion peeking through as they looked at the empty coffee table. “Ye weren’t, of course, but tha panic I felt after hitting send told me more than anythin’ I wanted it ta be true. It was the biggest slip I allowed meself until tha’ party.”

Alistair’s face went blank, eyes staring at nothing now. “I was tired. So much had gone wrong, everything was happening at once, me mother was *dyin’*, an’ I was *so feckin’ tired* of how I watched everything I did, said, an’ *thought* around ye two. But I couldn’t stand ta avoid ye either. I wanted ta let go, fer once. I didn’t want ta feel anythin’ because so many things hurt at tha’ point. So I drank more than I ever had before an’ almost ruined everythin’.”

Alistair looked at the ceiling then and Gilbert saw the gleam of tears in their eyes. He had to squeeze the couch cushion to keep from springing himself at them and just holding them. Their throat bobbed as they fought not to cry and Gilbert almost couldn’t do this anymore.

Alistair cleared their throat again and closed their eyes. “I was devastated when Ma died, but it was almost a relief ta go back ta Scotland. I considered transferin’—“

“You *what?!* ” Gilbert exclaimed without thought, utterly horrified by the prospect of not having them in his life anymore.

Alistair flinched and Matthew snapped at him, “Gilbert!” He looked at him, ready to demand how he was staying so calm, but the expression on Matthew’s face stopped him. He was shaken, tear tracks evident on his face before he wiped at them hastily, but his jaw was set, determined. His voice was strong, not betraying the despair on his face, as he said. “Let them finish. If they can tell us this then, by God, *we will listen* .”

He was right, *of course* he was, and this moment was not about Gilbert, but Alistair. Gilbert contained himself, nodded to Matthew, then looked at Alistair. “I’m sorry. Please continue.”

Alistair stared at them with wide, wet eyes, lips red with the effort of holding back those tears. They took a shaky breath, but continued. “I considered it, but I missed ye. I missed everyone an’ me hometown reminded me just how lucky I was ta have found ye all in tha first place. Ye both acted like tha party never happened, an’ I was grateful for it. Far better than tha realistic alternative. Yet here ye are, offering me tha impossible one.

“I lied ta ye both, fer a very long time, about somethin’ that was killin’ me. I needed ta own up ta tha’, and made sure ye understood tha’, before I trusted tha’ ye really wanted ta be with me. Relationships are hard, and it’s more complicated with three people. Honesty’s tha only way a thing like this would work and if...if you chose this, I would really want it ta work.” The last phrase was soft, nearly plaintive.

Gilbert and Matthew glanced at each other, an unspoken agreement that nothing had changed and they needed to fix this *now*.

But Gilbert had to say one thing first.

“I always had wanted more from you.” Alistair gaped at him, shocked, and Gilbert smiled. “I was disappointed when you’d implied you only liked women, so I didn’t do anything about it. I’ve loved you for so long and I cannot express how sorry I am that you’ve been hurting like this. It would be an honor to finally be able to call you mine.”

Alistair didn’t blink, didn’t move, but tears slid from their eyes. More followed when Matthew stood and their gaze shifted to follow him as he glided forward easily and used gentle fingers to wipe away their tears. He smiled at them sadly and said, “You were one of the first people to *see* me, take all of me and not only accept me, but cherish me. I’d loved you as a friend far before I had ever thought of you as a romantic partner. But I’ve only ever wanted to be with two people, and they are both sitting on this couch. My mind hasn’t changed; I want to be yours, for you to be mine, and for us to be each other’s. Thank you for sharing your pain with us, but all it made me want to do was hold on to you and never let go.

“You are very easy to love, Alistair, and I would be honored if you would let me.”

Something shifted in Alistair, a caution melting away. Their green eyes lit up and they softly touched the hand that had lingered on their face. There was such...joy in their expression and God, but Gilbert had never loved Matthew more.

Matthew saw the change, too, and continued, voice surer somehow, “We really want this to work, too. So—can we be your boyfriends?”

“ *Yes* , ye daft—“ Matthew interrupted them with a kiss and Gilbert’s heart felt whole.

Chapter ?: Breathless

Matthew meant for the kiss to be short, the revelation that he could kiss Alistair so overwhelming that he couldn’t help it. No matter his intention, he lingered, savoring their lips on his, soft but a bit chapped.

When he did pull away after a few beats, they gaped at him, smile threatening with every second. “Rude.”

“Yeah? What’re you gonna do about it?” He asked without thought. That was uh...a little aggressive. Embarrassed, Matthew then made it worse by slapping a hand over his mouth and backing away with wide eyes.

Alistair’s face went blank, eyes glazed for a moment, before focusing on Matthew with an intense, sure look. Their mouth curved sharply and they swept their eyes down Matthew’s body before glancing at Gilbert, saying, “He do tha’ a lot?” Alistair reached for him and Gilbert took their hand as he stood.

“Yes. Sometimes he doesn’t even realize he said something like that.” Gilbert pulled them to standing.

Alistair smiled at them both and said, shaking their head, “I’ve always said yer a menace, Mattie. At least now I can say yer *our* menace noo.”

Gilbert pulled them closer, until his arms were around Alistair. “I like the sound of that,” he murmured before Alistair closed the distance and kissed him. There was nothing tentative about it, both of them starting at 60 mph. It made heat stir in Matthew’s belly to watch them and he moved towards Alistair when he heard a key in the front door. He froze but neither of his partners seemed to register they were about to have company. Neither he nor Gilbert had talked to Ludwig about the fact they were trying to get Alistair to join their relationship, so going from ignorance to *seeing* it may be an unwelcome shock to his friend.

Matthew left the room to intercept Ludwig, the front door nearly opening soundlessly. “Hey, Ludwig,” he said, just a little louder than he normally spoke, leaning against the entryway to the living room.

Ludwig blinked in mild surprise from where he stood in the door frame but smiled a little in greeting. “Hello, Matthew. Happy Halloween.”

“You, too—“

“Hey, Mattie!” Feliciano leaned to the side behind Ludwig with a wide, smug smile. Then he obviously pushed Ludwig further into the house hard enough to make his friend stumble.

Matthew’s eyebrows rose because he hadn’t realized Feliciano had actually managed to get Ludwig to be *with* him. “Feli! What a surprise.” He leveled a meaningful look at his blond friend, obviously scheduling a talk later, and Ludwig had the grace to blush. “Happy Halloween.”

Ludwig cleared his throat but proceeded to take off his shoes. Feliciano filled the silence with, “Ve, I’m guessing that you’re blocking the entry for a reason...?”

He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and Matthew failed to blush as expected. They hadn’t been caught in flagrante delicto, but they never actually got around to talking about comfort levels Alistair had with people knowing about their relationship. Gilbert was in Matthew’s camp of *hell no, we’re not hiding shit*, but that had to be a unanimous decision. “Um...”

A gentle hand was laid on his waist and urged him to straighten. The somewhat hesitant nature told him who it was before Alistair said, “Hey. We’ll get out of yer hair. C’mon, Mattie.”

Alistair took his hand to pull him away and Gilbert quickly ducked his head into the entryway, seeing the outright shock on both Ludwig and Feliciano’s face. He laughed then. “Ha, the look on your faces! Anyway, get it, West! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

“Gilbert.” Matthew said as he let Alistair lead him to the stairs, meaning *stop teasing your brother*.

“Got to go; my better third calls.”

“Och, rude!” Alistair shot back, but Matthew saw the grin on their face.

“Don’t be like that, Scottie. You’re just as much a degenerate as I am. He’s your better third, too.”

“Can we *please* leave them in peace, you two?” Matthew said, fond exasperation clear in his voice. He had no one to blame but himself; he signed up for this madness.

“Yer provin’ his point, ‘cause I couldn’t care less.” Matthew face-palmed, making them both laugh. In retaliation, and to prove that being conscious of other people’s feelings did *not* mean hiding they were together, at the top of the stairs Matthew pulled back on Alistair’s hand and kissed them in full view of the downstairs.

“Not that much better,” he whispered on their lips. Their eyes caught in a moment of understanding before Gilbert pushed him, them towards his room.

“Congratulations!” Feliciano shouted after them, seemingly having recovered.

“Thanks!” Matthew managed to call back before Gilbert firmly shut his door on the outside world. Alistair kissed him again, this time holding him as if weren’t planning on letting up any time soon. He relaxed into them, opened for them, and let them control the kiss as he tentatively touched them. Matthew traced carefully along their spine and reveled in the contact, cataloging with the (barely functioning) half of his brain all the differences between the feel of his two partners. He had never touched anyone besides Gilbert like this and Matthew found he was hungry for the knowledge that was unique to Alistair. He wanted them, he wanted them *so much*, but they needed to talk about things.

Gilbert pressed against Matthew’s back, dipped his head down to kiss Matthew’s shoulder and made his approval of the scene before him known against his lower back. Matthew moaned into their mouth, thought momentarily abandoning him. The sound made Alistair press their own hardness against Matthew’s stomach, their hands going beneath his shirt, seeking skin.

Their touch had Matthew thinking past the mantra of *yes, yes, yes* in his head. He broke the kiss with a shaky gasp. Alistair, undeterred, kissed down the side of his face to his neck. “We... We should talk— *ah* !” With an almost alarming speed, Alistair found the most sensitive spot on his neck and sucked on it *hard*. Matthew’s knees just about gave out, the press of their bodies the only thing that was keeping him upright.

Alistair laughed against his skin. “Noo I know why he always marks ye here. What do ye want ta talk about?”

“Uh...” Matthew said unintelligently as he fought to think beyond the feel of two sets of hands on him as Alistair continued kissing his neck. “PDA comfort?”

Alistair drew back and looked at them both seriously. Gilbert lifted his head from Matthew’s shoulder at the same time they said, “I don’t want ta hide us. I’ve wanted ta touch ye both wit

free affection fer *so* long an' I want ta be able ta do it. Nothin' extreme but I may be a bit clingy fer tha first week or so. I've gotta lot built up," they warned teasingly, but the upsetting reason behind it was there all the same.

"Perfect," Matthew said before kissing them and deliberately (perhaps unfairly) grinding his ass against Gilbert.

"That's good," Gilbert said, hands coming down to hold Matthew's hips still, "because Feliciano will likely spread the news around."

Alistair bit Matthew's bottom lip harder than Gilbert usually would and an embarrassing small sound escaped his throat. He only distantly noticed how he relaxed into them at that crucial moment, instantly distracted by how Alistair pulled away once more (*Come back here, dammit* , he thought) to look at him. Matthew wasn't overly concerned with that, mouth instead seeking the length of their neck.

"Matt—" Alistair started to say when they were cut off. It immediately became clear that Gilbert had kissed them, so Matthew pressed tighter against them to allow more room.

Oh, wait. He was supposed to be doing something, wasn't he?

Matthew hummed against their skin, suddenly content just to hold them close, sandwiched as he was between his partners. He nuzzled Alistair a little to get their attention and asked, voice soft, "What do you want, Alistair?"

The kiss broke with a wet sound and there was a second of hesitation as Alistair swallowed nervously. Matthew kissed at their pulse, hopefully soothing them, and received a low, weighted response in return. "Everything."

"Okay," Gilbert said and it was soft. He moved from Matthew's back to his side, now able to be in more direct contact with Alistair. "We have time."

"All the time in the world," Matthew echoed, pulling back to look at them. It pained him to see their expression, the combination of fierce longing and fear, and he wondered how long it would take for them to believe him. To try to lighten the mood, he gently cupped their face in a hand and smiled wryly. "Though I did initially mean: what do you want right now, tonight?"

"I don't know," they said, hand immediately coming up to hold him still and face turning to kiss his palm. Matthew's heart melted at the gesture, but it didn't distract him from the dangerous glint in their eyes that made him suspect the statement was a bit of a lie.

Gilbert likely thought the same, eyebrows raised in disbelief before something seemed to click. He came around Alistair's back to hug them and Matthew was close enough that he felt their shudder as they welcomed the touch. He kissed Alistair's shoulder before resting his chin against them and winking at Matthew. "Talk to us, love." Alistair's breath audibly caught at the use of the pet name, a blush filling their cheeks as they dropped Matthew's hand, embarrassment clear. The sound made Gilbert smile and kiss said cheek. "We might be able to help you figure out what you want most right now."

Alistair licked their lips and relaxed further into Gilbert while pulling Matthew closer into their personal space once more. "I'm torn. I want ta just hold on ta ye both. I can't describe how much I...wha' I would have given fer so long just ta be able ta touch ye fer a moment."

Alistair was looking away, not able to meet Matthew's eyes and, not for the first time, Matthew wondered at how much they held themselves back and the toll it had taken on them. He had never doubted that Alistair had feelings, but he had probably underestimated just how deeply they felt, even after knowing them for a year.

Matthew hugged them, too, Gilbert's arms between them and Matthew's arms coming around to Gilbert's back. He kissed the closet part of them when their arms tightened around him, returning the gesture. "We could do that," Matthew said, eager to make them comfortable with the relationship.

"But..." Gilbert said, tone leading and suggestive.

"...I want ta take ye apart," they continued lowly at the prompting. "I want—"

They choked off their answer and Matthew recognized that as the sign of someone not wanting to say too much, of not knowing how much they could get away with. Their hands spasmed as they fought to say what they wanted. There was little space for denial here, now, so Matthew offered, "I had never been with anyone before Gilbert. I had never *wanted* anyone before Gilbert, and I didn't understand or accept what I wanted. But he made it clear that I shouldn't be afraid of what I want here, because there was nothing wrong with it. Please, tell us, and I promise we won't turn you away."

Alistair took a deep breath and pushed Matthew far enough away so that they could see his face. The intense look to their eyes made something in Matthew still, come to attention. Alistair smiled, just a little, and that only made him more alert. "I've wanted Gilbert fer a long time. Anyway I could get ye, every way possible," they said, leaning back, further into his body. Gilbert accepted them easily, but his eyes were now on Matthew, too, as if the two long-time friends were seeing the same thing. "But ye, Matthew. Ye I've wanted ta protect and heal and *break*. I want ta make ye scream and beg. I want ta claim ye. I want *us* ta claim ye, together. Everyone knows tha' Gilbert is mine, so far as I would go afta anyone tha' hurts him. But ye? I want them ta be afraid ta even *look* at ye wrong, because ye are *ours*."

Matthew was staring at them, wide eyed and flushed and with parted lips. His heart was pounding in his chest and his mind had gone quiet, utterly still. Something about Matthew's reaction amused them and their mouth quirked to the side as they finished, "So ye see me problem, yeah?"

Matthew knew what his response was to all this and he looked over to check Gilbert's reaction. His boyfriend held his partner close, but his eyes had taken on a feral quality that Matthew reveled in. Oh, Gilbert not only approved of Alistair's desires, but on some level he had not yet shown Matthew, he shared them.

He met Alistair's eyes again, saw some lingering apprehension there, a challenge for Matthew to stand by his word and not turn them away. So he licked his lips and asked softly, "Do you want to fuck me, Alistair?"

They stiffened, clearly recalling the last time Matthew had asked them that. Unlike in the spring, he held their gaze, letting them see the genuine offer to rewrite that part of their history. “ *Yes* .”

Matthew stepped back and out of Alistair’s hold. He saw the flash of alarm on their face, and smiled a little in what he hoped was reassurance. Then he deliberately met both of their eyes. He read between the lines of what Alistair had said and prayed that his instincts were correct when he sank to his knees, sat on his heels, and said, “Please.”

Something in Alistair snapped.

Never, *never* in their wildest fantasies was the present scene imagined, mentally shied away from as too unrealistic, too painful.

It was one of those moments that seems to last forever, yet takes place in the space of a breath. They had never felt so *present* , so thoroughly in their body. Gilbert made a deep sound in his chest that Alistair felt, erection casually resting against their ass, suggesting but not insisting. His arms tightened around them as they both stared down at Matthew, *on his knees* as he offered himself to them. His lips were parted and his body language was relaxed, but he held Alistair’s gaze boldly, completely and rightfully unashamed. He offered, was *begging* , for Alistair to take and take and take from him, trusting from the start that they would give him what he needed.

It was humbling. It was empowering.

It was *maddening* .

They would hold them later. Matthew had said they had all the time in the world. In that moment, they unquestionably believed him because it would take a stronger person than Alistair to resist that offer.

It would take them being in an entirely different universe to deny *Matthew* this.

Time began moving again.

“Don’t move, Matthew,” Alistair said lightly, to test out the parameters of what Matthew needed from them. His eyes widened, but a lovely flush came to his cheeks. His gaze then focused somewhere on Alistair’s right shoulder, not making eye contact with Gilbert either, and seemed to settle.

“Ye can take orders. Good.” Alistair rolled the words around in their mouth, testing Matthew’s reaction, and was gratified when his next exhale came out shaky.

“Have you made your decision, Scottie?” Gilbert said, close enough in the quiet space that there was no need to raise his voice. His hands slowly, but lightly, moved across their body to land on their hips as he kissed their shoulder once more.

They hummed, turned into him, and kissed him briefly, still not quite believing they could or used to the thrill of sensation every time they kissed either of them. Then Alistair whispered in his ear, not wanting Matthew to hear, “Ye were right; I can’t deny him a thing.”

He laughed lowly as they pulled away, sharp smirk on his face completely at odds with the genuine joy and wonder in his eyes. He kissed them again, hard, like he couldn’t help it, before turning his head to look directly at Matthew. Alistair followed suit and saw Matthew watching them from beneath his eyelashes. Alistair hummed again and moved from Gilbert. Their boyfriend caught their hand as they stepped forward and gently touched Matthew’s face. He leaned into the touch, silently asking for more.

They would touch him more, *a lot* more, soon enough, but there were some things they wanted to get straight first. Alistair had done their research into BDSM once they had realized their interest in it, though they had yet to physically explore that interest with any degree of satisfaction with a partner. They had no idea how well-versed Matthew and Gilbert were in kink, but Matthew’s reaction was beyond encouraging.

Alistair placed their fingertips under his chin and urged him to lift his face. He obeyed, looking up and training those attentive blue eyes on theirs. “Aren’t ye perfect,” they crooned. Matthew’s eyes closed for a moment as he shuddered and God, but Alistair wanted to destroy him. “This is our first time together, baby, an’ it’s important I know wha’ ye like an’ wha’ ye don’t. Gilly will help, but I don’t want ye ta hide a thing from me. I want ye ta look me in tha eye, an’ voice anything ye need or want ta. Do wha’ ye want unless we say otherwise. I’m goin’ ta clear big things wit ye as we go. If I do somethin’ that hurts ye in a way ye don’t like, I *need* ye ta tell me. If I hurt ye in a way ye *do* like, I want ye ta say tha’, too.”

Alistair smirked a little and Matthew’s eyes glazed over. He licked his lips as Gilbert said, almost to himself, “How the hell did I end up with two super kinky partners?”

Alistair turned to look at him, doubt starting to creep in again. They had been acting off instinct and theory, but kind of forgot the fact that they didn’t know quite how much Gilbert’s attraction to dangerous people translated in the bedroom. Matthew’s enthusiastic consent and utter comfort made them assume he and Gilbert had played like this before, but... “Are ye uncomfortable wit this?”

“Gil...” Matthew started, voice rough enough that he had to clear his throat. The worry had managed to come through clearly.

“No, it’s not that,” Gilbert said, squeezing Alistair’s hand. “I’m happy, though we would really need to talk about anything involving pain before it happens.”

Hmm, Gilbert shied away from the idea while Matthew had been approving, even eager at the thought. Noted. “Of course,” they soothed, happy he had said something. “If either of ye want ta stop or slow down, just say it, yeah?” Alistair wasn’t sure about consent play, so that would likely always be true with them.

Gilbert nodded and Matthew said, “Yes. Yes to everything you said.”

Alistair focused fully on him once more. His expression was serious and lovely. “Get up, *leannan*,” Alistair said, then froze. They hadn’t meant to call him that. They rarely defaulted to Scots, yet the word hung in the air, their surprise too evident for their boyfriends not to notice. They both stared at them and Alistair cursed their cheeks for heating.

Matthew rose, hesitated, then laid both of his hands on Alistair’s chest. He kissed their jaw and asked, “What does that mean?”

It was their turn to clear their throat but they answered, “Sweetheart.”

He pulled back surprised, blinked, then beamed at them and Alistair just about melted on the spot. “I like it,” he murmured before kissing them. Matthew had probably meant for it to be a light kiss, but Alistair captured him around the waist and pressed them together. Their ardor was met and matched easily, though Gilbert did let go of their hand to lightly rub their back. He knew how little Alistair spoke Scots, though he perhaps didn’t understand why.

Alistair didn’t want to dwell on that, would have time to analyze that their subconscious choice to death later. Matthew liked it, which was most important. Besides, at the moment they had two people to make love to and they took precedence of psychoanalyzing their fucked up brain.

Alistair slowly broke the kiss and said against Matthew’s mouth, “Be good an’ take off yer clothes, *leannan*. ”

“Yes—“ he said, obviously cutting himself off. He blushed and frowned a little as he stepped back, as if confused. Then he said quietly, “Yes, Alistair.”

They puzzled at that for a moment as Matthew began unbuttoning his shirt. What even...?

Oh.

Was it wrong that they were pleased Matthew’s first instinct was to say, *yes, sir* ? To address them respectfully in every way?

If it was, they gave less than no fucks.

Alistair made another considering noise and brought Gilbert’s hand up to their mouth to kiss it lightly. Eyes trained hungrily on Matthew as he stepped back and started to unbutton his shirt, Alistair said, “You’ve trained him well, Gilly.”

“You would think, but this is all Matthew. I had nothing to do with it.” Gilbert responded slyly. At Alistair’s raised eyebrows and incredulous glance, he smirked and released them to walk around Matthew who was now blushing furiously. Gilbert put his hands on Matthew’s shoulders and leaned against his back. His hands easily helped ease the garment from Matthew’s body as he bent his head. Without a word, Matthew exposed his neck to him on a sharp inhale. Gilbert nipped at him but held Alistair’s gaze. “You liked being marked as mine from the start, didn’t you, baby?”

Matthew shuddered, color high on his cheeks and starting to appear on his chest as he whispered, “Yes.”

Gilbert started raising Matthew’s undershirt and the sophomore immediately lifted his arms. “Tell Alistair how you feel when we tell you what to do.”

The shirt came off, his messed hair leaving him looking disheveled and utterly inviting. “I-I like it,” Matthew said quietly, eyes down. “It relaxes me. I want to please you and it’s reassuring.”

Alistair could count on both hands how many times they had been rendered absolutely speechless. A not insignificant portion of those were related to Matthew. It was a completely reasonable reaction to the show Gilbert had made of disrobing their boyfriend, allowing Alistair to see him for the first time. They crossed their arms to keep from going over and just *touching* the graceful, hard curves of Matthew’s body, enjoying watching the process far too much to interrupt it.

They gave thanks to whatever deity was listening for getting them to this place.

“And do you like pleasing me, Matthew?” Gilbert’s mouth was hovering above the skin of his shoulder, one hand caressing his torso and the other dipping past waistband of his pants at his hip.

Matthew made a small, needy sound that went straight to Alistair’s core. “I *love* it.” He then lifted his gaze to Alistair’s as he undid the button-fly of his trousers. “And I’d love pleasing you, too.”

It was a good thing that Alistair could never have imagined this moment in its full complexity before, because even the fantasy would have haunted them cruelly. Now, though. Now that this was real, they were going to savor it and cherish their partners with every fiber of their being.

Matthew’s trousers and pants fell to the floor together, and Alistair stopped thinking, if only for the moment.

To say that Gilbert had not expected their first time together to be like this would be an understatement.

Sure, he had never exactly expected Alistair to be shy and blushing, but the easy air of command they had was something to behold. The way their eyes perused Matthew’s body as a monarch surveyed their kingdom—with propriety and reverence—was subtle but telling. His partner was making plans, plans which included laying claim to the revealed skin.

Matthew was trembling slightly under Gilbert’s hands and he automatically soothed him, knowing how insecure Matthew could be about his appearance. He kissed his cheek and raised his eyebrows at Alistair, prompting them to say *something*, to give Matthew some reassurance here.

Alistair met his gaze with bright eyes and the look told Gilbert Alistair knew exactly what they were doing. There was a tiny movement at the corner of their mouth, only the barest of smirks, and they said lazily, “Turn fer me. Show me all of ye.”

Matthew inhaled shakily but obeyed. He stepped out of his bottoms and kicked away the cloth. He faced Gilbert now, immediately looking anxiously at his face. Gilbert could almost hear Matthew’s thoughts racing, questioning whether he was good enough or attractive or if Alistair would still want him after this. *Silly boy*, Gilbert thought as he kissed his quickly on his forehead. For all that he knew *why* Matthew felt unworthy and overlooked, he didn’t understand it.

Meanwhile, Alistair looked at Matthew like it was Christmas morning and they had gotten everything they had asked for. They moved forward silently and Matthew jumped a little when they touched his shoulder with the slightest pressure. “Okay?”

“Yes,” Matthew breathed.

Alistair hummed as they shot a questioning look to Gilbert. *Ye know why he jumped?* They asked silently.

He held their gaze and deliberately entwined his and Matthew’s fingers before bringing up their hands to kiss his. Matthew smiled at Gilbert, swayed into him and understanding crossed Alistair’s face.

Gilbert saw Alistair’s hand come to Matthew’s bare waist for the first time and watched as Matthew shivered when they entered his personal space, perhaps close enough to touch him. “Ye,” they started only to stop and kiss Matthew’s bare shoulder, “are more beautiful than I imagined. Absolutely, perfectly, his, mine, *ours*.” In the last sentence, they kissed whatever they could reach. By the last word, Matthew had turned his face towards them, silently asking for a kiss to his lips that Alistair granted.

Gilbert watched Matthew melt into Alistair and was nearly lightheaded with arousal.

Matthew pulled back just enough to say against Alistair’s lips, “Yours.”

[A/N: ...]

“Wha’ do ye want, baby?”

Matthew felt shaky, needy yet reserved. He knew how important this was

[A/N: Well.]

They watched as they moved together, enchanted by sound of Matthew’s helpless cries and Gilbert’s panting breaths. Matthew’s eyes were closed, lost in pleasure, but Gilbert did not look from the man beneath him and Alistair could not blame him. To them, they were near shining things, the light reflecting off of their sweat-drenched bodies making their boyfriends

seem ethereal as they did the most earthly of acts. Alistair had seen too much to believe in magic, but as they watched Gilbert and Matthew, they wanted to.

Then Matthew reached out towards them with a hand that they easily caught and held as his voice rose. Gilbert looked to them, met their eyes, and Alistair saw the wonder there even over all his lust. That one look said clearly that Gilbert did not quite believe this was happening and that he had no words for how the experience affected him.

His attention snapped back to Matthew as his back arched and his hand convulsed in Alistair's, his voice begging for something unnamed. Gilbert glanced to Alistair once, as if to say, *look at him, see how lucky we are*, before pumping into him harshly. When Matthew's body went taut and he quieted for an instant, Gilbert leaned over him and said roughly, "Come, baby."

Matthew, wonderful boy that he was, obeyed, gave himself fully to the pleasure with a scream and Alistair loved him just a little for that alone.

But they would not, could not think on that now. They would not argue with themselves about if they loved him, too, or how much, because Alistair needed to watch as Gilbert let himself go in front of them for the first time. They watched him drink in Matthew's pleasure from a short distance, fierce satisfaction and near painful pleasure on his face. Alistair took in every detail of the moment, the frantic pulse at Matthew's neck and the clenched hand...

[A/N: Okay, that's all I have. The end of the story would have dealt with Matthew, Gilbert, and Alistair dealing with the fact that Matthew was the only one not yet graduating. They would have made it work and had a happy ending. Oh, and Ludwig and Feliciano finally got together. Hope you enjoyed this little look into what would have happened. Thanks again for reading!]

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